THE WORLD'S WARRANT

NORAH DAVIS

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SHE STOOD IN A TRANCE OF THOUGHT (page 187)

THE WORLD'S WARRANT

BY

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CHAPTER I

"'T is an awkward thing to play with souls."

Upon an afternoon late in September, near the hour which upon Morganton's social dial indicates the dinner hour, a gentleman and two ladies sat upon an upper gallery at the Midland in earnest, if not altogether grave, conversation.

The gallery was a part of Carlysle's apartment, and Carlysle himself sat upon the stone coping of the balustrade facing his wife and their guest, Miss Caruth, in an arrested attitude that wavered between incredulity and amusement and was faintly tinged by indignation. The earnestness of a high purpose — a purpose of more than average stature, at any rate — steadied his eye and infused the tender mirthfulness of the glance he bent upon his two companions with a trace of real exaltation. But Carlysle made these swift dashes into the far ether heading, one would dare swear, straight for the stars, only to come an airy cropper over some metaphysical hurdle or other, and flutter lightly back to earth with a shrug and a smile which deprecated the blundering earnestness of gravity in having compelled his descent.

His tone of incredulous question was explicative

of his attitude, and his glance put both his listeners instantly on guard, though he addressed only his wife.

"Tell him!" he echoed, in amazed interrogation. "Tell Goodloe? Not much!"

The faces of the two women continued to express tense negation, though Miss Caruth's glance, which returned to the letter in her hand, tacitly relinquished active opposition. Neither spoke, and after a moment Carlysle went on: —

"Men marry, Kate, as boys swap knives, 'sight unseen,' and what law is there, legal or divine, to compel the woman to toe the line that the man fudges? Will *he* tell her? Not on your life will he! Will Goodloe give her a single shred of his past? Not he! No more than that blasted puppy, the father of her child, will tell the woman he will one day make his wife. Then why in the name of justice and common sense should this poor girl be handicapped when Goodloe enters the race free?"

"It is always that way," said Miss Caruth evenly, "women waste themselves terribly in explaining their lives; men simply live theirs."

"And, after all," murmured Mrs. Carlysle, "they only explain themselves to themselves; hardly anybody listens, and nobody believes their explanations."

"But, Jim," — a plaintive note in Miss Caruth's

voice matched the furrow that appeared between her level brows, — "suppose after we have taken all this trouble to get this thing on, James H. Goodloe," — she glanced at the letter in her hand to be sure she had the name correctly, — "should find out some way" —

"'And leave her!'" grinned Carlysle. "Women always think that! Their view of men has absolutely no perspective — men take jolly good care it shall not have. But suppose, as you say, he should find out? He'd only be where women are every day."

Carlysle stole a moment's musing, bending forward with locked hands about his knees.

"The incredible inconsistencies of this thing we call morals! Now here are you two girls dragging this poor child several notches higher on the scale than you demand of Goodloe and justifying him — well, extenuating him, call it what you like — in looking askance at her past with never a word as to his own. What right would he have to throw her over on her record unless he could show a cleaner one? Not that he would. If he was some white-livered, play-acting cad in a novel he might, but no live man with red blood in his veins and the knowledge of good and evil in his soul would. And a decent chap as this fellow seems to be would be safe to stand by her. Once he has married her it is odds if he'd leave her even if he knew all that

she will, undoubtedly, hide from him like grim death."

Miss Caruth looked quickly up from the letter she was reading.

"*After* he has married her! After, Jim?"

"Callie promised Jane if it were left to her, entirely to her, you know, she would tell him herself, before she married him," supplemented Mrs. Carlysle equably. Carlysle erased a smile with a meditative finger.

"Well, leave it to her," he said easily; "'the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light.'" Miss Caruth met his rallying eyes with a troubled perception of the obliterated smile.

"If you were a woman, Jim," she interpolated wistfully, "say a girl like Callie, with her sort of judgment"—

"Oh — judgment!" grimaced Mrs. Carlysle, "Callie and judgment!"

"If I were this young woman," said Carlysle deliberately, with a level gaze of introspection unconsciously upon Jane's earnest face; "if I were she I would give my child to the Sisters at Orrville and let them turn him into a sleek little priest 'all shaven and shorn,' and I 'd marry James H. Goodloe like a shot and live happily forever and a day in that 'comfortable, two-storied house' at Redfalls, Nevada, that he 's so eloquent about, and let the past go

hang! What has the past ever done for her, I'd like to know, that she should hang it like a clog about her neck?"

The eyes of the two women met in silent protest, and Carlysle, watching them with smiling comprehension, accepted the challenge of their silence and took up his defense retrogressively.

"When Jane first suggested this plan," he began suavely.

"Jane!" echoed his wife.

"*I?* I suggest?" murmured Miss Caruth, with eyes of sweet reproach; "I hardly call that fair, Jim."

. "Can you look me in the eye, Janet," demanded he severely, "and deny that you wanted to 'supplement' this young woman by some honest fellow who'd love and cherish her and give her a hiding when she needed it?"

"The hiding was a little thing of your own; but yes, I confess the idea did cross my mind that marriage was the solution of poor Callie's problem. She is such a rudimentary creature, spite of her external finishing—quite the lap-dog type of woman, and failing the lap,"—with a dainty shrug,—"why, as I said, it *did* cross my mind"—

"And not only crossed it, my lady fair, but skipped out between those pretty lips of yours in a good, stinging bit of analysis of the gentle sex, if I remember rightly. And now,"—this in a deeply injured

tone,—"now when I, with my unfailing perspicacity, perceiving the utility of your suggestion, went to work to put this rather mucky bit of 'life' upon a solid basis so that you two giddy philanthropists could handle it, what do I find,"—he paused in dramatic summary,—"but the two of you opposing me tooth and nail! Taking some high moral stand or other about this James Goodloe, by Jove, who may be Don Juan himself, for all you know!"

"No, no, Jim dear! It was only"—

"It was untenable, I tell you," Carlysle cut in, now fairly astride the high horse of masculine logic to override feminine arguments; "here were you and Jane supporting this young woman out of your purses; something had to be done—her own contribution to the situation being the information that 'folkses had always took ker er her,'"—he paused to laugh,—"and it was plain to my feeble understanding, at any rate, that 'folkses' must continue to do so! If not we, then"—he waved his hand in explanation to the letter in Jane's hand—"James H. Goodloe. And when I suggested that instead of chasing around after her, wasting your pocket money buying lace caps and pink boots"—he paused to grin at his wife, who ignored him—"for her rashly importunate infant, you take up some rational plan to help the girl find herself"—

"'Rational'? Did you say 'rational,' dear?" inquired Mrs. Carlysle suavely.

"I really meant it," concluded Carlysle, with a glance in his wife's direction that acknowledged payment on the score of the pink boots; but a note of real human kindliness, very good to hear, had come into his rallying voice, and the faces of the young women turned upon him were full of tender gravity.

"It may be that Callie Larkin has struggled out of the pit for a moment; but it is only for a moment. She is not the sort to stand alone, as Janet says. But if she does want to be decent, why, in the name of common humanity, let us give her a hand up and be sensible about it. The fundamental claim of good blood is something," he broke out in a new note, "and this girl comes of gentle people somewhere away back. It may be that hereditary instinct will swing her into line again. But of course this is bound to be a rather mucky job, with plenty of plain talk; and if you and Jane are going to squeal and blush every time I assume that this poor girl is — what she is, we might as well stop now. In short, if you are not willing to face the music, speak now or forever after hold your peace."

"Mixed metaphors make me ill, please, Jim," murmured his wife; "tell us what you learned about the man."

"Well," Carlysle's tone was distinctly congratulatory, "I smoked Goodloe out pretty thoroughly. He 's a clerk or foreman — foreman most likely — with the Redfalls Rolling Stock people, and his bank

spoke well of him. I'll tell you what it is, girls, if this deal goes through, Callie may thank her stars, and we shall have something very well worth while coming to us in the way of golden harps and crowns — later."

"I wish her name were not 'Callie,'" moaned Jane; "it is so impossible to adjust it to any sort of tragic expression."

"'Hester Prynne' would be more in character," smiled Carlysle. "But tragic? This is plain, humdrum business, my dear Jane, not tragedy at all."

"Why on earth do you suppose he ever did such an absurd thing as to advertise for a wife?" inquired Mrs. Carlysle, with exasperated patience. "And why not advertise for blackberries or mullein leaves at once?"

"Some woman turned him down as like as not, and he had n't the stamina to react," Carlysle elucidated. "There are fellows like that. But this sort of thing is not so utterly unheard of among a certain class of men, dear. Lots of men — this fellow's sort — regard marriage as a by-product of the real business of life. If there 's anything in it for them, well and good, but they 're not going to let it interfere with the regular output. 'Brutes'? Not at all, I assure you. Very good fellows; self-made men, you know; been too busy all their lives to bother with women — never heard of the leading-up process, I dare say, and when they do want to

marry they go about it the only way they know. Goodloe knows he is taking a risk; he takes it as he would any other sort of business risk; she's taking a bigger one, and she takes it as all women do — because she has to. Read us the letter, Jane. I like his grit, tackling a love letter of that sort!"

REDFALLS, NEVADA, Sept. 17, 18—.

"'MY DEAR MISS MEADOWS:'" read Jane —

"'Meadows?'" queried Carlysle, with an irrepressible smile — the thing was beginning to take a piquant hold upon his fancy; the psychological possibilities in the play of character between the three women in their deal with destiny appealed irresistibly to a certain metaphysical twist in Carlysle's otherwise straight-grained mental timber. "Why these Machiavellian tactics, my honored confrères, in a straight business deal? A three-ply alias! Ye gods!"

"On Jane's account, naturally," Mrs. Carlysle hastened to explain. "Do you suppose, either of you," with pathetic lucidity, "that James Goodloe is going to sit quietly by and let you and Jane marry him off to all sorts of people without looking into it himself? Jane had to write the letters, you know, as Callie cannot write."

"Machiavelli, did I say? This lays away over Machiavelli! It's foxy as Lucifer," laughed Carlysle; and, with a sudden collapse into new mirth as a fresh aspect of the thing shook upward in the kaleidoscope

of his laughter-loving mind, "would n't it be a delicious combination? — Jane to bag the game, I mean, after courting him for Callie. I think," he mused delightedly — "I think it will be best to put Jane under bond. Thomas Aquinas himself could n't stand out against a love letter from Jane, and unless Goodloe is immune" —

"Please go on, Jane," sighed Mrs. Carlysle. "When Jim begins to play mental checkers!" —

But Jane was ready with an explanation of her own.

"Kate always snubs the artistic element, you know, Jim. That name was a ray of genius; a scintillation from my sense of the eternal fitness, in fact. James Goodloe wanted a country girl, you remember? So I got Callie up in character. 'Mary Meadows' smells of clover and the — er, the green fields and that. Fancy Callie in a white, ruffled sunbonnet and a blue-sprigged lawn — the sort they sell in country stores, you know, Kate? — leaning on James Goodloe's manly arm" —

"I do not deny that Callie *looks* the part," put in Mrs. Carlysle, with distinctly disparaging emphasis.

"Don't be insidious, Kate," smiled Jane. "It 's unchristian."

"And to look the part you 're cast for in this world is nine points in the game, my dear," added Carlysle, with marital repressiveness. "Go on, Jane."

My dear Miss Meadows [obediently read Jane for the second time], — I am just in receipt of your letter in reply to my own of June 28.

How good of you to take me up, and so frankly and kindly as you have done! I assure you I was beginning to feel quite cut up.

In view of the contents of my letter, to which you have replied, I shall assume without further explanation that we understand each other as to the object of this correspondence; and further, that you were sensible enough to accept my motives for conducting my courtship in this unusual way, on trust. I appreciate your confidence, and I hope you feel that it is justified by my faith in the purity of your own motives in having accepted my offer.

This position upon both our parts is based upon good sense and good business principles, and, moreover, puts us in line at once with the mutual trust that is at the root of all that is strong and tender between men and women, and is peculiarly essential to the relationship which we propose to establish — I mean a clean, honest partnership.

I am a clumsy chap with women, as of course you 'll soon find out, and an incredible dolt in my lack of experience. Shall you mind that very much?

Write to me quite frankly, will you not? Ask me anything you care to know, with perfect assurance that I recognize your right to do so.

One thing I wish to say as to your part in this.

I realize that in taking up an affair of this kind you, as a woman, are liable to misconception from a conventional standpoint, that I do not share. I wish you to feel from the very beginning that I stand between you and any form of misconception, just as though you were already my wife. I assume here and now all responsibility for any consequences arising from this.

Of course, everything is in your hands to arrange; your wishes are my law in this affair.

Be fair to me and true to yourself, my dear, and trust me for the rest. Faithfully,

JAMES H. GOODLOE.

Jane met Carlysle's interested eyes with a waiting smile in her own.

"Top notch," he replied briefly to the smile. "So far as a bungling letter can show a man up, you have put in your little thumb, Jane, and pulled out a" —

"Chump," supplied Mrs. Carlysle calmly. "He talked all over the place and ended by saying nothing."

"— plum," finished Carlysle firmly. He was reading the letter with frowning approbation, and now raised his eyes, striking the letter angrily with his finger as he met Jane's eyes.

"What in thunder," he demanded, "made a fellow like this do a thing like that?"

Jane shook her charming head in denial of responsibility for the inscrutability of Goodloe's motives. But Carlysle was not heeding her; his mind was far afield along the path he had marked out for the two whose destinies he had elected to assist.

"This girl, Callie," he began abruptly, presenting another phase of the subject, — "this girl is rather pretty, is she not? I mean if she were decently dressed and knew a few things."

"Pretty! Why," Mrs. Carlysle sought distractedly for an adjective at once descriptive and sufficiently disapproving to express Callie. "Pretty? She 's — she 's outrageously pretty! A regular man's beauty, if ever there was one. The sort of woman that carries a perpetual danger signal to other women. You know her sort, Jane?"

Miss Caruth nodded.

"But she 's not in the least vulgar, Kate. I do not know why she is not, but she is not. She 's trivial, inconsequent — which is the word?" — she turned puzzled brows of inquiry upon her friends, — "and of course unthinkable in a social sense, but not" — judicially — "not impossible, you know."

"They both express her at times," mused Carlysle. "But do you know it is the very thing that you have remarked in her — the absence of vulgarity — upon which I am founding my faith in her reincarnation? The only prophecy that fulfills itself is heredity. Now little Callie is the daughter of a

hundred earls; the hieroglyphics of race are written all over her."

"I'd like to know where?" demanded Mrs. Carlysle; "her grammar is something perfectly"—

"In more immutable things than grammar, my Kate! The language of the blood concerns not itself with syntax. The poise of this girl's head, the turn of her brow, the arch of her instep in her little brogans, the shape of her finger-nails, are Nature's stamp and superscription, and the instincts to match are there. We have but to waken them."

"Wise men let sleeping dogs lie, Jim!" admonished his wife; "and I must say I do pity this wretched man!"

"You need not; blue blood may run to seed, but it does n't altogether fizzle out in a few generations. She has made an awful mess of her life, poor girl, and I dare say she 'll lead Goodloe an awful life." He paused to smile with cheerful brutality over the prospect: "But she 'll never make a social blunder, and a man can stand a good bit of bull-ragging in private"—he left a kiss of teasing identification upon his wife's cheek—"if he can take his walks abroad with a woman by his side with a throat like a swan and eyes like purple corn-flowers."

"Well, upon my word, Jim!"

"Callie's eyes *are* blue, my dear! and why am I to be debarred the use of hyperbole when it is my wife's favorite figure of speech? But to narrow this

thing down to common sense and exclude poetic license if you say so, it means the salvation of this girl or her — damnation. She 'll follow at this man's heel in a matrimonial chain and collar and get through life decently enough, no doubt; but put her life in her own hands!" He annotated his suggestion with a shrug that combined sadness and cynicism in about equal parts. "And here, of all places! You'll do me the credit I hope, girls, to remember that I have opposed this plan from the first."

"It is only for a couple of months," put in Mrs. Carlysle soothingly; "the linen woman's place is vacant only while she is at home. And apart from Jane's influence — and we hope a good deal from that — it will be more convenient to have her here this winter, if you and Jane really mean to carry through this preposterous plan."

"Consider that settled, dear. It 's going to be no end of fun, a regular mental theatre for us all winter."

"But I never dr-e-a-med that it would be a man like this!" murmured Miss Caruth distressfully.

"Oh, brace up," Carlysle admonished her cheerfully; "I dare say Goodloe is a vulgar sort enough, come to know him. Most men are. And if he should happen to have a streak of honor in him, it will be none the worse for the girl. Write him a corking love letter, Janet, and clinch it."

He rose as he spoke, with a grimace directed to the dainty dinner gowns worn by his two companions. "I'll tell you what it is, I'm going to ask an injunction from the court enjoining you two girls from dressing for dinner. It is sheer brutality to force such an example upon a tired man in a God-forgotten hole like this."

"Dressing for dinner is one's duty to one's neighbor, dear. Jane and I dress to advance the interests of the Company. It is a beautiful example of self-abnegation. Try to see it that way."

"I prefer to 'abnegate self' the other way," murmured Carlysle lazily. "I'm never unselfish unless I'm comfortable."

"But the Development Company!" cried Miss Caruth in gay protest, falling unexpectedly upon his flank and demurely routing him with slaughter. "Contemplate, if you please, the moral tone of a Company whose officials do not pander to the Mammon of Unrighteousness?"

The Company being Carlysle's pet fetish, before whom he offered oblations night and day without ceasing, he succumbed, and with a gesture of gay capitulation vanished in the direction of his dressing-room, leaving the two young women to resume their interrupted stroll upon the gallery, awaiting his return.

They were charming women, both; of widely differing types, yet welded into closest friendship by

affinity of tastes and opinions. They had been college chums, and were meeting in this somewhat out-of-the-way niche of the world for the first time since their college days, an interval of three years, which had been spent by Miss Caruth abroad, and by her friend in the regeneration and expansion of marriage with a man whom she at once idealized and supplemented. In this latter capacity she had followed him South, where with the enthusiasm of their convictions he, with a handful of financial pioneers, was engaged in what she defined as "making over Alabama."

The elegance of their dinner gowns would have declared them exotic to their present environment had the analysis extended no further; and the knowledgeful eye would have recognized in them at once highly specialized products of a civilization analogous in its effect to the emery wheel of the lapidary upon the jewel in the end of his stick. The result of this finishing process was easily discernible in an impersonal polish that belonged equally to both; a delicate, fine glaze of manner, as it were, through which their individualities displayed themselves as from beneath a transparent, impenetrable lacquer, brilliantly enhancing to the eye of the social adept, but apt to be a trifle confusing and discomfiting to those impetuous souls who must needs touch a thing to believe it real.

There was about both women an attenuated sug-

gestion of having consciously carried out this effect of personality in the exquisite finish of their externals; in the level clearness of their voices, whose pure, hard tones had the unvibrating sweetness of porcelain sharply smitten; in the reserved vivacity of glance and feature, trained to a repressed expressiveness that suggested concentration rather than repose. The acuteness of intellectual vision, undoubtedly possessed by both in a high degree, was accented by this effect of concentration to a point where it became a sensitized intelligence, pervading the entire personality of each and not dependent in any degree upon mobility of feature or modulation of voice.

This definiteness of personality escaped rigidity in Mrs. Carlysle by the depth of a shade only; pretty much as her gray eyes were softened to kindliness by the happy chance of deepening to blue at the edges of their irises.

But a deep core of warmth lent fluidity to Miss Caruth's nature; the currents of her being pulsed visibly at times beneath her glaze of reserve, until she seemed actually to glow through it like an ice-bound flower.

She was a girlish woman of twenty-five; slender and pliant and strong; with long, fine lines, exquisitely drawn and finished, and a soft indefinite blend of coloring that melted into shadowy eyes, and hair of a deeper tint of duskiness, until she seemed a

drawing done mellowly in one tone. For the rest, any of those similes that express power sheathed in softness, or intensity combined with impalpability, would have admirably expressed her; and by way of comparison she most resembled, perhaps, a faintly colored flame, say of a burning chemical, registering an incredible temperature, yet of so spirit-like an aspect as to be scarcely discernible.

It was obvious at a glance that the gowns that Mrs. Carlysle and her friend wore very logically expressed the women wearing them; and only a degree less obvious, that a not inconsiderable amount of time and money had been expended upon them, to produce the effect of simplicity, that accorded with the crudity of their surroundings, mingled with an elegant costliness, that, it is just possible to conceive, may have constituted the elevating moral tone of which Mrs. Carlysle had made mention.

Each was in perfect harmony with herself and the other, and in as frank, not to say glaring, discord as can be imagined with the disorganized landscape about them, with the sole exception perhaps of the building which at the moment afforded them a background for their charming figures.

The Midland, — an imposing pile of limestone from the local quarries, — whose long façade, picturesquely broken by a huge *porte cochère* glittering sullenly under the rays of the low sun, was the one fully equipped enterprise in the whole of the

embryonic town, and was considered the debutante investment's "drawing card."

In the Company's prospectus it was gravely cited as being "located in the business portion of the progressive town of Morganton," — the adjective being used so nearly in its literal sense as to be distinctly ironical, the progressive town of Morganton being in fact in a state of progression from the inchoateness of a financial scheme to such definiteness of perception as resides in a blue print.

The Land and Mineral Development Company was made up of young men not yet arrived as capitalists, but with some money, and rather more brains, and a very cogent determination to use the one to increase the other. Though at this precise interval of time Morganton had in the way of assets a charter from the State of Alabama, a situs upon the "gently rolling levels of the richest mineral and agricultural lands upon the Western continent," two trunk lines of railroad, a railway station, and — the hotel. The town itself, for the moment, lay about in scattered heaps upon the lean, denuded fields, in piles of brick and stone and blocks of lumber brought in by fussy, ejaculatory freight engines and dumped beside excavations, gaping in the red-clay soil like new wounds red and bleeding.

To the right the river ran between endless cotton fields covered with a ragged carpet of stunted cotton ready for picking, and farther yet the fields

were girdled by a ring of dull purple hills. The Midland, which as yet housed the entire colony, formed with the railway station a core of intense life and energy, about which the life of the old farms lapsed drowsily.

CHAPTER II

"'T is as easy now for the heart to be true
As for grass to be green or for skies to be blue;
'T is the natural way of living."

In the beginning the Development Company's *raison d'être* had been the opening of the Etowah coal and iron fields, that lay supine beneath a ragged miser's coat of knee-high cotton that covered all the string of counties adjacent to the river.

Peter Clark and Carlysle had come to Alabama with a small party of Eastern capitalists of the sort who look into things, and to the shrewd eyes of these young financiers the conditions they had met there had seemed a veritable magnet of commerce. Nature had, as a matter of fact, done some rather clever combining of productions and resources in this particular corner of the earth, of which these gods in knee pants had a pretty shrewd appreciation. They pronounced it good, plenty good; some of the more optimistic spirits among them even going to the length of declaring it a "d—— good put, by Jove!" And they set themselves cheerfully to work to supplement her efforts by the addition of men and capital.

The Land and Mineral Development Company was

organized forthwith, with Carlysle as its president, and Morganton emerged from nebulosity by due process of evolution, as a charter, a situs, and a blue print.

And the evening and the morning were the first day.

Fortune comes to men in all sorts of guises and disguises; some are shrewd enough to penetrate the masque, and bold enough to seize her, and uncompromising enough to wring from her what they call, prosaically, opportunity; others delve for it with sweat-blinded eyes turned downward their whole life long, while, as like as not, she stands at their elbow grinning in a harlequin's coat.

It came to Peter Clark and Carlysle in this way: The day before the departure of the party the two young men were taking a farewell drive about the red-clay roads that, like a tangled terra-cotton ribbon, loops the river counties together, when they made the great find, and came plump upon the pot of rainbow gold, — the Prometheus brand that was to vitalize the whole scheme and breathe into it the breath of life and success.

Just beyond Brantley's plantation, where the party had been making headquarters, Hickory Ridge thrusts down an impetuous elbow as though bent upon barring the river's farther progress south; but the gentle giant had only made a supple bend and flowed on unfretted beneath the beard of pines that

clung tooth and nail to the mountain's steep ascent. And here, where the shadow of the pines was blackest upon the rugged escarpment, Chinquepin Falls, slipping through the clenched teeth of the boulders, flung herself downward in a mad leap of two hundred feet, like a hunted thing, to the river below, landing amid a smother of foam and a clash of silver cymbals, half within the river's bed and half within the gored side of the mountain.

The two men had been following half idly and half curiously the muffled thunder of the waters, and, emerging from the dense screen of the woods with its jubilate in their ears, had come face to face with the splendid sheet of foam-flecked water, curved like a silver bow across the mountain's side. For a second they stood, in dumfounded admiration, its deep roar cutting them off from the world, looking upward to where the dark pines trembled to the rush of the water, shooting downward like an avalanche.

"Let there be light!" shouted Carlysle, in a burst of admiration that carried him sheer over the verge of poetic license into unconscious profanity, lifting his hat as he spoke in involuntary homage. "You beauty! You goddess! You dream of power!"

"'Dream'?" echoed Clark, his eyes hot with excitement; "it's power incarnate! Power to set every wheel in Alabama spinning and keep 'em spinning

world without end! Jove, Carlysle, she 'd run every plant in the State of Alabama for time and eternity!"

"Ay," said Carlysle absently, not moving his eyes from the falls; and for a space neither man spoke again. A simultaneous realization of the meaning of the falls as a factor in the development of the State's resources had flashed into the minds of each, carrying with it the instantaneous conviction of success upon a scale undreamed of by either. The Development Company, a good conservative scheme enough, but requiring time and money in its development, had in the space of ten seconds leaped into a stupendous certainty in the possession of this Prometheus gift of gods' power to transmute flying foam and mist into solid stock and dividends. This forest Danaë had reversed the legend and flashed downward to them amid a shower of gold.

"Now why," Carlysle broke out at last with angry vehemence, — "why did that incredible ass, Brantley, hide this from us? What under the canopy of heaven could he expect to do with it alone?"

"Pooh," said Clark contemptuously, "Brantley has never seen this, not in the sense that you and I see it. If he 'd supposed you 'd want to get up a picnic, now! Talk about Arcadian simplicity — with this gold mine running to waste here!"

"Whose land is this?" suddenly demanded Carlysle, meeting his companion's eyes, that had hardened at his question to a cold determination,

with his own full of half-quizzical, half-exasperated laughter.

"Darn their patriotism, and the 'altars of their sires'!" remarked Clark briefly, apropos of nothing, but with the emphasis of reminiscent vindictiveness. Carlysle answered his tone by an easy tolerant laugh.

"It's natural enough, Peter, they'd want to swing on to their land; it's all the beggars brought out of the war, you know."

"But what can the duffers do with naked land?" demanded Clark, with acrid good sense. "And if we set up the capital" —

"You ought to carry off the swag?" laughed Carlysle.

"Yes; by George, we ought!"

Clark and Carlysle knew each other well; each man had a good working estimate of the other's ability and his limitations, given such and such conditions to wrest from them the essentials of success. They had a quiet, serious talk as they drove back to Brantley's place through the blooming woods; a talk of titles, of options, of riparian rights, and possible bills to be "got through," interlarded by allusions as trenchant as brief to "d—— Southern unprogressiveness," with a result that a tentative programme had been sketched out before they parted. Clark decided to remain behind as Brantley's guest for a couple of weeks longer to "go into the thing," and after a day or two spent among the dusty records of

the Pike County court-house at Brandon, and a couple more given to careful probing of old Brantley as to the owner of the adjacent lands along the river, decided to put it to the touch, spite of Brantley's counsel which had made Clark's keen, rather shallow gray eye grow harder, and his square chin squarer still; for Brantley had admitted with saturnine frankness that "Jourd" had declared his fixed determination to have no "Yankee locuses er settlin'" on his land; "he 'd had all uv their sort en-durin' er the wah" that he could put up with. But Brantley had added as a poultice to this bitter wound, to what he supposed would be Clark's sensibilities, the information that "Jourd had ben ergin ever'thing in th' wide created world sence th' creation er man on down to th' or*gan*-i-zation er this here Develop*mint* Company."

But Clark, though slightly dashed by old Jourdan's classification, allowed no grass to sprout beneath his brisk Eastern footsteps, and the next day found him driving along one of the deep, red-clay roads that gash the face of the glebe, in the direction of Isom Jourdan's plantation, to open negotiations for the transfer of certain rights in the water. "Honestly, if he 'll let you," had run Carlysle's last desperate injunction from the steps as the train pulled out; "by fraud if we must!"

Clark was turning this advice over in his mind as he drove; the hour was early, and upon the dew-wet clay of the road the horses' feet gave back a muffled

thudding; an opal, cloud-dappled summer sky was overhead, and between the tall hedges curtained with wild roses, Clark caught glimpses of the cotton fields on either side, covered with the corrugated velvet of young cotton as far as eye could see. Clark's eye rested upon it with contemptuous antagonism. He knew the job he had before him.

Cotton is the fetish of the agricultural South. To divorce the Southern planter from his cotton field is not only to snatch the morsel from his plate and the drink from his cup, but, as he sees it, to rob him of his gods and his fathers' gods; to take from him the traditions of his race and the wisdom of his ancestors; and Clark's experience with the planters throughout Pike and Morgan in the last ten days had supplied him with a fair presage of what lay in store for him.

But men and money, so he told himself, were the tools that best fitted his hand. He knew to an atom the ratio of attraction between man and money, and knew it to be greater than any known affinity between man and land — known to Peter Clark, at any rate. So, with his faith founded upon the universal solvency of cash, Clark drove blithely onward through the crystal freshness of the early summer day.

There had been no indication of a dwelling to break the green-and-gold monotony of the endless cotton fields, but presently Clark's horses slackened speed before a wide-barred gate that gave upon the

road with so much finality that Clark accepted the hint and turned in the entrance. A grassy roadway stretched before him, interminably, it seemed to the young man as he drove onward between continuous lines of locust trees, that stretched away in a perspective of snowy bloom ahead of him; the air was heavy with the cloying perfume and drowsy with the drone of bees swarming in the roof of bloom; no faintest sound of human life impinged upon the wide silence. Clark seemed to have strayed into a world whose elements were perfume and golden silence. The wheels ran noiselessly over a carpet of unkept grass, starred thick with flowers, and far down between the blooming trees a flutter of blue, that had been intermittently visible, by degrees resolved itself into a woman's form. The clear white light beneath the trees revealed her as a slender, wand-like creature, and the buoyancy of her movements suggested that she was young. She was clad in a faded cotton-checks gown, so short that it displayed her coarse brogan shoes stained by the dewy grass; a shapeless sunbonnet hid her face, and as Clark drew in the horse beside her she raised a slender sun-burned arm and pulled nervously at it, drawing it farther over her face so that it was completely hidden from him. Her gown was roughly turned in at the throat, and as Clark waited beside her for her to answer his question if Mr. Isom Jourdan lived anywhere near there, he noted idly that her

throat and the under surface of her chin had the delicate whiteness of porcelain. She still kept her arm between them as she answered, tartly Clark thought, that he lived right there.

"Right on ahead, do you mean?" persisted Clark.

"Right on erhead," she retorted. Clark was sure about the tartness this time, though the voice that came from the depths of the limp sunbonnet was as liquid as a thrush's note. He stooped from his seat in an effort to see down the collapsed funnel of the bonnet.

"Is he at home?" he ventured further.

"Pa? Uv course not," with curt decision. "What would pa be doin' home this time er day?" she added combatively.

"Waiting for me, I hope," smiled Clark, amused at her brusqueness. "I rather expected it, you know, as I sent a note last night asking for an appointment."

"Air you th' Yankee fum Mr. Brantley's?" she demanded, with gathering asperity, as, moved by irrepressible curiosity, she raised her face to his. The ruffled edges of the bonnet fell backward, and her face looked out at Clark as from the curved cup of a convolvulus; she had repeated her question before Clark remembered to reply.

"B'cause 'f you air — 'n' I know you air! — pa said fur th' whole kit 'n' bilin' uv you to git right offen his lan' and *stay* off."

The delicate shadows from the swaying boughs fell across her face, and as Clark looked down into her eyes he silently corrected his first impression of them as black; seen in the full light they were dark ink-blue,— more accurately the blue of a damson's bloom or the early morning shadows under deep cedars, — and they surveyed Clark with the grave steadiness of a child's, as she awaited the effect of her astounding message upon him.

"Where were you going?" he asked, pausing with his foot upon the step. He had ignored her message entirely, to her obvious surprise. It occurred to Clark that she had expected a violent outburst, — that she was accustomed to violence.

"Me? I was goin' to meet you!" with unmistakably belligerent emphasis.

"To meet me!" cried Clark. "Oh, I see! To warn me off the premises, eh?"

She made him no reply, but her unsmiling eyes continued to peruse his face with an Eve-like frankness. Clark stepped down and held out his hand.

"When a girl comes to meet me I always drive her home," he replied gravely to her indignant start backward. "Even a Yankee knows enough for that!" he rallied her, stooping to look under the bonnet as he spoke. She snatched it jealously closer, but her eyes through the crevice met his, lustrous, laughing, bewitchingly provocative.

"Come," Clark urged her with extended hand.

"Do you s'pose I 'd ride with er Yankee?" she inquired tauntingly.

"I think you might," Clark retorted coolly, "if the Yankee is willing to ride with a red-headed girl!"

The girl whirled swiftly upon him, red lips apart, hands clutching the bonnet determinedly, full of amazed, chagrined question. Clark laughed teasingly.

"I saw it the first thing," he informed her nonchalantly. "But, of course," — with exaggerated politeness, — "of course I should never have dreamed of mentioning it except that you threw it in my teeth about being a Yankee, and refused to ride with me."

"You *air* er Yankee," she retorted breathlessly, "'n' they ain't no use in you tryin' to deny it! Even 'f," — she regarded him meditatively, — "'f you don't look like what pa calls 'em."

"What does he call them?" asked Clark, smiling into her eyes.

"'D—— blood-suckers,'" said she easily; "but you ain't, air you?"

"I'm afraid I am," said the young man, laughing as he drew out a card and handed it to her; "but I'm not the dangerous variety — not the sort your father used to know. It 's not blood I 'm after, it 's dividends!"

She turned the card over and over in her hand, her lips curving into a smile of Puck-like derision.

"Then you'd jest as well traipse back down th' ruver, fur we ain't got none! Pa," — a slightly scornful toss of her head accented her contempt, — "pa don't raise nothin' but cotton. Gentlemen never does! Nobody but po' white trash ever raises truck!"

Clark roared with laughter. "Do you suppose I run a stall?" he asked her.

"They ain't no tellin' what er Yankee'd do," she retorted coolly. Her eyes were upon the card in her hand, and for a moment she had forgotten her determined defense of her hair. Clark bent forward, and with a gentle, unexpected movement lifted the shapeless bonnet and bared her head to the blazing light. It was covered with absolutely flame-colored hair — hair whose deepest shadow was burnished gold — in curling masses that waved low upon her brow and almost hid her rosy ears, clubbed schoolgirl fashion in her neck. Her face as she turned it upon Clark was one flame of temper; her cheeks blazed poppy-red, and he noticed that her delicate nose turned sharply upward at the point, and her red mouth had sharp curves that suggested that it might sting as well as kiss, spite of its deep, dimpled corners.

"'F that's all th' perliteness you've got!" she flung at him through a mist of tears, "I — I don't blame pa none fur runnin' you offen his lan'! But nobody could n't 'speck no better uv er Yankee!"

With his hand behind him holding the bonnet, Clark leaned upon the trap, regarding her with laughing eyes as she stormed at him, with wet eyes and blazing cheeks, making an occasional dart at the bonnet, which he held beyond her reach, as swift and glancing as a humming-bird's, enjoying her in tantalizing silence. Presently he said, quietly: —

"Fie, what a spit-fire it is! Pouting and scolding and calling names! I've heard often and often of the beautiful dignified manners of Southern girls; but if *this* is a sample of Southern aristocracy" —

She doubled her slender fist and struck fiercely at him.

"I hate you! — hate you! Git offen pa's lan'! Git off!"

Clark broke into a delighted laugh as he caught her hands and held her fast.

"I thought you'd do that!" He bent his face to hers, — "North or South, East or West, it's the law of the land, and every girl knows it! A kiss for a blow."

But she fended him off so earnestly that he paused. "If you say not, of course. Come," — his eyes coaxed her, — "be friends with me! See how sweet everything is." Clark looked about him vaguely, suddenly conscious of the sweetness of the June day about him, that struck inward to his senses with the sharpness of an essence. "You be sweet, too, won't you?"

He could see her draggled lashes hiding her downcast eyes; suddenly she lifted them, and, as lightly as a wind-blown flower might dash off the rain, dashed off her tears.

"How do you know I ken?" she asked him demurely.

"How do I know that these flowers are sweet or the sky is blue?" retorted he, with brief conclusiveness, as he drew his reins through his arm. "If you won't drive with me, I'll walk with you."

"I did n't mean I would n't — fur keeps," she informed him gravely. "I was jest 'sposin'."

"Oh!"

He gave her his hand, and this time she accepted it and sprang lightly to the high seat.

"I think," said she then, with a gracious dignity, perfectly composed and conscious of itself, and entirely unexpected to Clark, — "I think you ought to ax my pardon fur th' way you acted. Er gentleman always 'pologizes 'f he makes er lady cry."

Something in her face silenced the laugh upon Clark's lips; he bent his knee gayly to the floor of the trap as he cried: "Most humbly, lady fair!"

To his surprise she took him seriously, and surrendered her hand to his lips with a quaint savor of the great lady.

"Forgive me," he murmured, for the moment genuinely contrite.

"You 're very 'scusable," she murmured softly

in return, and, the conventionalities being thus happily disposed of, Clark took his seat at her side.

"You have n't told me your name," he suggested, as they drove on with the low wind wooingly in their faces.

"You first," she admonished him serenely.

"But you know mine! I gave you my card ages ago."

"Card?" blankly.

"Can't you read?" he asked her bluntly, after a moment of shocked silence.

"I ken read printin' 'f it 's big 'n' no hard words. You tell me."

"Peter Clark."

She broke into a low gurgle of laughter, as clear as running water.

> "'Peter, Peter, punkin-eater,
> Had er wife 'n' could n't keep her!'"

She gibed him. "'N' I thought shore you 'd be named Claude or — or somethin' like that!"

"Jove," protested Clark. "Do I look like that sort of muff!"

"You can have three guesses at mine," — she raised one rosy finger to keep tally. "One" —

"Apple-blossom," announced Clark firmly.

"Pooh!"

"Was that wrong? Now I have it!" — he looked deep into her eyes. "Heart's-ease!"

"That 's two," she warned him. "'N' 'f you miss this time you won't never, never" —

"I 'm not going to miss! I 've known it all the time; I was only jesting before. It 's Goldy-Locks, of course!"

The trap had been rolling smoothly over the grass-grown avenue, but as Clark spoke the wheels grated upon a harsher soil and they passed between two tall stone pillars whose inner surfaces were stained with iron rust, as though a gate had once hung there, and upon the top of each the shattered figure of a lion still ramped in splintered dignity; a tufted tail or a hind claw gripping the stone alone remaining to show how bravely once its owner might have upborne the heavy stone arch whose scattered blocks still lay about the entrance.

On either hand dense thickets of blooming shrubs shut them in; crepe-myrtle flushed the green thickets, and calycanthus and purple lilac and white were lashed together into an almost impenetrable jungle by the tangled cordage of honeysuckle and yellow jasmine; here and there the huge tent of a magnolia rose, glittering among the dull greens like mail in the sunlight, and Clark's wondering eye detected the stone casque of a warrior or his shattered shield protruded through the flaunting banners of passion flower and trumpet vine.

They rounded a curve in the high green wall, and without warning the avenue terminated in a wide

circle in front of a huge pile of débris, heaped in tumultuous confusion in the centre of the clearing. Clark pulled in the horses sharply, and sat gazing in silence upon the strange scene. The mass of ruins was covered with drifted earth and green with fresh grass, and from it tall forest trees sprang vigorously, their roots entwined among piles of brick and stone and rotting joists and beams; marble columns, shattered and defaced, showed in the mass like the white bones of a skeleton, and portions of an ornate cornice, carved and lettered, low down in the heap, bore mute testimony to how complete had been the fall of that once proud rooftree. Immense oaken beams that had resisted the terrific impact of the cannon were sullenly yielding, cell by cell, to time's more insidious attacks. Midway the mass, which was not entirely unlike a great green grave, a flight of wide marble steps, firm and untouched, below the range of the cannon doubtless, led upward to the devastated threshold, and paused with a blankness indescribably desolate.

The silence of the place was broken only by the calling of birds, and, just distinguishable in relief against the sunny quiet of the lost garden, the roar of Chinquepin came dully to Clark's ears. Unending, unchanging, pervasive; the genius of that desolate solitude.

"What is this place?" asked Clark, in a hushed voice, leaning forward with his reins hanging loosely

between his dropped hands, his eyes immovably upon the ravaged scene before him.

"This is McGuion House, where I live," said the girl stiffly. "Th' door is on the other side — 'f you wanter go in."

A flush had risen to her cheek, and a trace of wistful uneasiness betrayed itself in her voice; but Clark was not heeding her.

"That," he cried, pointing insistently, — "that buried house! You cannot live there, you know."

"But I do!" sharply, though with quivering lips. "I was born there, and I have never lived anywhere else."

Her glance had hardened as it rested upon the mass of ruins she claimed as her home, but something in the young man's half-awed, half-indignant surprise softened her in spite of herself; her voice, as she went on, trembled with indignation, but Clark easily detected it as an impersonal resentment that did not, in reality, include either her own feelings or what she possibly credited him with.

"That 's my grandfather's, Lacy McGuion's, house, that th' Yankees knocked down with cannon balls endurin' th' wah; out there," — she pointed to a circular opening in a maze of box, — "is where they piled all the beautiful pictures and books and marble things outen th' house and burned them" —

"In the name of heaven, why!" cried Clark, his eager eyes traversing the country round them. "Ah,

I think I see; the house must have been in the way of some important manœuvre" —

"It was *meanness!*" cried the girl furiously, her eyes black with anger, her short red upper lip trembling as she faced him. "Meanness, I tell you! What they done ever'thin' else they done fur! Yankees air the meanest things on earth! They stole 'n' butchered 'n' — 'n' they 'd do it ergin 'f they had er chanst" —

Clark leaned over her, smiling in spite of the moment, and laid his finger on her angry lips. "Hush!" he said gently; "it 's too horrible for a little tender thing like you to be so harsh and bitter."

"They air 'n' I hate them!" she reiterated, as she thrust his hand away. Clark caught her hands and holding them firmly made her meet his eyes.

"Take it back," he cried imperatively. "Say you did not mean it!"

A sudden quiet fell upon her; she stretched out her hand with an unconscious gesture of dramatic dignity to the buried home, the devastated gardens. "When they take that back! When ever'thin' is just like it was in Grandfather McGuion's time, then I 'll say I did n't mean it!"

"Good!" cried Clark. "I 'll take you up! That 's exactly what I 'm here for. The Yankees wrought this ruin, you say? Well, the Yankees will undo it. All this will be a thousand times better

than it was— How? I 'm going to tell you; come." He leaped down and held his hands to her. She gave him hers and set one little brogan upon the step, studying him with perplexed eyes. As he set her down a whisper, soft as velvet, brushed his ear.

"I did n't mean you, nohow."

"Sure?"

"Shore."

A lilac tree overhung the steps, thrusting great heart-shaped clusters of pearly blooms through its green roof and making a tiny shelter from the sun, growing more ardent toward noon, and here they sat them down. Clark flung himself upon the stone at her feet, and with the sunlight dappling his bare head with motes of gold, the delicate odor of the lilac in the air about him, and the girl's face set in a frame of spring green above him, Clark began his recital of the possibilities to her father, to herself, to the Development Company, and incidentally to him, which lay hidden in the falls whose muffled roar was like a velvet cushion upon which the golden silence seemed to lean and drowse.

The girl was too much engrossed with Clark himself to make more than a pretense of attention. Clark's wholesome vigor, the alert poses into which he fell unconsciously while he talked of what so profoundly interested him, the perfection of his dress, his strong white hands full of expression, his penetrating glance at once dominant and reserved,

his unaccustomed accent, the caressing, superior note in his carefully modulated voice, were each a separate revelation of manhood to the girl.

Clark was, in fact, the ordinary well-set-up young Eastern man, turned out by the lathe of civilization by thousands upon thousands every year; a type as familiar in the business world from Canada to the Gulf as the face of a greenback note; but the girl was silently setting him against the only men she had ever known, lads from the adjoining plantations, or clerks in country stores, with a result as natural as it was favorable to Clark.

When the wonder of his presence and the greater wonder, that grew upon her as unconsciously as the air of the June day renewed her blood, that her nearness was as delightful to him as was his to her, would let her listen, Clark was saying: —

"I can understand perfectly that your father might not care to part with land that had been in his family for generations; hereditary associations count with some men," — with an imperceptible shrug, — "but it is merely the use of this water, and, er — only such land adjacent as we should need for a station and a plant and that, you know, and on, practically, his own terms. I'm afraid you do not understand, Miss Jourdan, what this really means to you. Let me tell you, will you not? I will not bore you with business details, but briefly this deal means any amount of money that you like to name. You

could rebuild your grandfather's house in much better shape, if you cared to do so. You don't know what there is in the world to enjoy!" His long glance into her eyes carried its message of what there might be.

"But I must see your father," he resumed impatiently, after a minute. "Come, take me to him, will you not? Let us find him; every moment is precious!"

He sprang up, waiting impatiently; but the girl leaned her head back idly against the stem of the tree behind her, regarding Clark with great dreaming eyes, the tricksy corners of her mouth curling upward in a slow derisive smile.

"Pa 's at Brandon — as you might er known by me setting here with you." Clark gave an impatient shrug. "But I 'll reason with him" —

"'Reason'!" cried Clark, with amused exasperation. "The deuce! I never dreamed of such folly. Any man on earth would jump at this" —

She slowly shook her head. "Not pa. He won't let er thing be touched." She waved her hand toward the pile of débris — "Not er finger has been laid on that since th' Yankees went erway; when th' front of th' house tumbled down it piled up and kept the cannon balls from knocking down the rooms at the back; they are all buried except just th' front — but we 've lived there ever since."

A trace of sadness had crept into her voice, and

Clark's eyes rested pityingly upon her. This lovely creature forced to pass her young life in that ghastly pile of ruins — a sacrifice upon the altar of hate! It was too hideous for belief.

"What insane folly makes your father keep this pile of ruins here! Why does he not build another home" —

The girl's face turned to his expressed grave surprise; a shocked consciousness of some sacred thing made light of.

"He keeps it to remember by," she said simply. "We remember by it to hate th' Yankees."

"Heavens, child! A grim 'lest ye forget,' by Jove!"

He rose and held out his hand to bid her good-by. "We're partners, you know, and I'm trusting to you to win out for us and the Company. Am I to come back to-morrow?"

"Not here," said she hurriedly. "I'll — I'll see pa 'n' — do you know th' way to Chinquepin?"

"Do I?" laughed Clark. "I have thought of nothing by day and dreamed of nothing by night but Chinquepin — until to-day!"

He drew her crumpled bonnet from his pocket, and standing in front of her put it on. Still holding it by its ruffled edges, he drew her imperceptibly nearer to him. In the shadow her soft eyes laughed into his, her sweet lips dared his own as she pulled lightly back against his hand that drew her closer.

"You forgot to guess my name," she reminded him.

"I do not want to know it," Clark answered, with a shrug of distaste. "I know I 'd hate it. I 'll name you for myself."

"What?"

He whispered a word, his face within the penthouse of the bonnet as his lips touched hers.

"To-morrow, sure?"

"Shore."

CHAPTER III

". . . The taint of earth the odor of the skies is in it."

A FORTNIGHT passed: fourteen long, perfumed, summer days, with the heart of June beating visibly through them, which Clark spent, bored and restive enough, lounging about the countryside in his boat or his trap, sometimes alone, oftener with Iola Jourdan, awaiting with what patience he might the result of her mediation with her father, which was to decide the fate of the Chinquepin deal.

In the narrow valley, walled in by mountains on either side, the wide slow current of the Tennessee, like a pavement of mother-of-pearl for its floor, bordered on either hand by endless acres of lush green young cotton, life seethed, and the planters along the river smiled with the old saw upon their lips, "When cotton 's in bloom, courtin' 's in season," as they caught a glimpse, far afield, of the two figures, the man's and the girl's, disappearing among the brown shades of the pine woods, or the dim shadow of the boat creeping among the other shadows of the canes, for coolness; — Clark would have said for coolness, but the river men following it with tolerant eyes and a slow sapient smile assigned another reason, as they shook their heads in sage prophecies

of other cotton bloomings, mingled with fond memories of,

> ". . . lightsom' days an' lang,
> When hinnied hopes about our hearts like simmer blossoms sprang."

The girl had entered into Clark's plans with a comprehension that amazed him, and plotted against her father with a shrewdness that would have amused him, had not the interest of the affair absorbed every energy of the young man's mind, or nearly every energy.

They met every day at a new trysting place, arranged by Iola with a strategic observance of her father's movements that she did not attempt to conceal from Clark. That she frankly hated and feared her father had been apparent to Clark almost from the first, and there were moments when he was uneasily conscious of the precariousness of the whole affair, touched as he undoubtedly was by her fealty to his interests, or, as they had come to call it in their talks together, "our interests." Her talks with her father, faithfully reported to Clark each day, showed the old man interested, at any rate; and from day to day this interest grew more keenly practical; the questions, in fact, that the girl propounded from her father were exceptionally shrewd, and Clark silently wondered at the old man's acumen, knowing old Jourdan to have been a planter rather than a business man; but he answered them

in detail, even elucidating some of the more important propositions in writing, and to all of these Iola brought back a verbal and invariably encouraging reply.

Of course these erratic negotiations were unspeakably absurd to Clark; that he, a business man from the East, where men knew the value of time, should waste two weeks philandering about country lanes, holding secret conferences with a girl as intermediary in a business deal that thirty minutes' talk face to face would have sufficed to settle, was nothing short of madness; but the earnestness with which she discouraged any attempt upon his part to meet her father, her reiterated assertions that she could and would manage him if she only had time, induced him to persevere, shutting his eyes to everything save the main issue, — the rights to the water power. Besides, to Clark's mind, a sane and equable one, narrow perhaps, but clear and serviceable, it seemed as incredible but that old Jourdan must in the end perceive his own interests to be identical with his Company's, as that Chinquepin's flow should be reversed and tower upward to the dark pines above. The young man was sure of a few things; he was sure he knew himself, for one thing, and he thought he knew the elements that go to make up success; it was, so he told himself, in the combination of those elements that men bungled.

Clark was thinking of this as he rowed up the

river to the trysting place she had appointed for that night, his arms aching with the strain he put upon them in his eagerness to be with her.

In the pocket of his coat, lying upon the seat, was a packet of stiff, clean, legal documents that caught the moonlight bravely. It was the longed-for concession to the rights in Chinquepin. Clark eyed it complacently. It needed but the old man's signature, and to-night Iola would take it to him and have him affix it, and the transfer would be complete. How well the thing had gone, after all! How cleverly she had managed her father — the old duffer must love her, spite of Brantley's animadversions. Of course he had yielded for the girl's sake — Clark mused a space, his face growing tender with thought of her. "Why not?" he asked himself for the thousandth time in the past fortnight. In the East she would be called "Southern" with a tolerant smile, and much can be forgiven a beautiful woman — and the heir to all that money! Besides, he would be always at her side to teach her, guide her, — do her lessons for her, if need be. He knew all that she need know, even how to dress her, — and there was nothing to undo luckily; she was simply ignorant, not coarse or unrefined; her instinct in many matters was truer than his own, and Clark's keen perceptions had not failed to take note of this. A year of contact with the world would rub the little rusticities from her — she was

the stuff to take on a flawless polish and — Why not?

As he drew nearer, straining blithely at the oars, he saw that she had taken off her shoes and stockings and was wading in a shallow runlet that escaped from the falls, holding her white dress high in both hands. Her hair, worn as he had taught her to wear it for him, hung in two half-loosened braids like burnished metal in the moonlight, and as she poised herself upon a stone and looked up at him, her eyes were like fringed flowers, expressing nothing but their own beauty. The girl's whole range of expression lay in her mouth, in the corners of the lips, that curled upward in precisely the line that an artist's pencil would have followed had he made tangible a subtle derision in his sitter's mind that is subjective rather than objective. She did not speak as Clark stood above her on the bank, but appeared to concentrate herself upon him in a silent effort to penetrate his mind, which gave her the effect of mentally holding her breath.

"Have n't I got pretty feet?" was what she said when she finally spoke.

"Like a naiad's, exactly."

"Er what?" she spoke quickly, with a frown of disapprobation; and Clark amended hastily, with a smile:

"A goddess. You remember the one you remind me of when you sit on the stone there behind the waterfall with the foam around you?"

"Aw yes; that one made of foam. I wonder how she stuck together, Peter?"

Clark did not venture upon an explanation, but silently lifted her in his arms and set her upon the bank.

"What 's th' matter?" she asked, with a slight catch in her breath.

"Nothing. I am in great shape to-night. Think of having it all settled at last!"

"Don't begin erbout that," she interposed hastily. "Let's talk erbout something that 's got some sense in it."

"You?" suggested he, with a grin. "Come to the boat, I want to go over these with you and show you what to do."

He drew her with him to the boat and went over the papers with her, explaining, instructing for the last time.

"Your father is a precious old humbug, dearest — with his deathless vendetta. All rot, just as I told you! Once we have a cinch on these concessions, it is going to give me great pleasure to tell him so; but in the meantime you are to see that he signs these before a notary — Oh, that 's all right!" — a sudden blankness had overspread her face, — "I 'll row Weston up the river to-morrow and land him somewhere about so that he can appear to drop in accidentally. Of all the frantic folly! Shall I?"

She had been printing the impression of her half-

opened lips against Clark's cheek as they talked, and he now substituted his lips, but the mutely asked kiss was not given; she stared past him into vacancy; her face, rigid with thought, was perfectly white in the moonlight.

"Did Mr. Ike Weston fix them up?" she asked dully.

"The attorney at Brandon? Yes. What is it, Blossom?"

"Not nothin'."

Clark broke into a tender laugh. "That's emphatic enough, at any rate! If I asked you how much you loved me, sweetheart, would you say, 'Not none'?"

She was fitting her finger into the cleft in Clark's chin, adjusting it with absent care. "Peter, supposin' — We air just *supposin'*, you know?"

"All right; 'supposin',"—

"Pa air awful cross-grained sometimes; supposin'," — her breath caught in her throat, but she steadied her voice and went on, — "supposin' he would n't never, *never* sign th' concessions, would you — You 'd cast me off, would n't you?"

"Don't talk rot," said Clark, a little coldly. "No sane man would have gone as far as he has and then pull out."

But a shadow had fallen across his sanguine mood at her words, and for a moment the thought crossed his mind to explain to her something at least of the demands that the sort of life he lived made upon a

man; how in a measure it reacted upon, controlled, his relation to her. The thought passed unspoken, but in its passage through his mind it had done its work; she had felt it pass between them, obscuring her sunshine as a passing cloud may dull the sun's radiant warmth for a moment. His set face looking past her, his eyes hard with thought from which she was shut out, his troubled breathing as she lay upon his breast, all told a story replete with cruel meaning. And with the passionate capacity of such a nature for suffering — strung as she was to her utmost tension of emotional experience — her heart rushed to meet the desolation of the years without him with an exquisite poignancy of pain that transcends the pain of later years by as far as young love's exultant throb outstrips the staid decorum of well-seasoned experience; mistaking, with all of youth's impetuous loyalty to the present, the divine aroma of the moment for her imagined need of him.

She choked back her sobs, some instinct warning her that tears would not avail her here.

"But supposin'," she faltered, "he — he won't? Would you — would"—

The tears would come. Clark was silent; his arms that strained her closer interpreting that silence.

An hour later Clark tied his boat at Brantley's landing. His host came down to meet him, combing

his thin beard with nervous fingers — an unfailing storm signal with Brantley. He walked beside Clark for a dozen paces in silence, then cleared his throat with raucous warning.

"Jourd's ben here er looking fur you," he said gently. Clark raised his head alertly. "I tol' him," Brantley went on, in his soft drawl, "thet you'd tuk th' las' boat up th' ruver."

"Why, what the deuce, Brantley! — He came about those papers, I suppose. I'll ride over there the first thing in the morning."

Prompt, alert, business-like, Clark was himself again. The sudden cessation from uncertainty was as grateful as the relaxation of a physical strain. Kindly, remonstrant humor was in the glance old Brantley bent upon him; he gave a rusty chuckle at Clark's mention of the papers.

"Well, I'll be durned! — 'F that air gal ain't got th' nerve er Julius Cæsar!"

"What do you mean?" cried Clark, a cold breeze of apprehension contracting his nerves a moment since basking in realization. Brantley's gently saturnine face was one gleam of laughter.

"Iola! 'F she ain't er twisted you 'n' her pa round her finger like er string! Jourd ain't never hearn tell uv this here Chinquepin deal ontel Ike Weston tol' him to-day erbout th' papers bein' made out fur his signature."

Brantley's rasping chuckle broke through again.

Clark's face was hidden as he leaned upon the railing looking with eyes hot with anger back along the current like molten silver that had just brought him from her.

"So," went on Brantley, approaching his situation with dramatic cunning, — "so Jourd he come on here 's soon he 'd got his gun, — he 's ez keen ez er bloodhound when he gets his dander up, — 'n' it tuk me cornsiderable time to turn him fum th' scent" —

"Pooh," said Clark contemptuously. A sudden thought struck him and he made a stride toward the boat. Old Brantley held him with a shaking, sinewy hand, gently and firmly as he might have held a fever patient.

"Naw, naw, son," he argued placably. "Yo' way lays up th' ruver" —

Clark strove to shake off the other's hand impatiently.

"She 'll be home by this; I cannot leave her alone with that old brute" —

"Shucks," said Brantley pacifically. "Iola air a match fur her pa any day uv the week. Always give er woman er chanst to tell her tale her own way. You ain't got no reason to be oneasy erbout Iola, seein' she fooled you at your own game. Shorely, shorely she was true to you," he answered Clark's restive movement. "'N' she 'd er made Jourd sign them papers by hook or by crook

'f Weston had n't er sprung her trap too soon. But you lay low and let her hedge her pa her own way."

Clark dropped the rope over the post; Brantley's homely logic had cooled the fever in his pulses. It was over — the fool's game of blindman's-buff he had been playing for three weeks. Of course Brantley was right. The dignified, the inevitable thing was to leave quietly on the midnight boat. A week hence the old life would have overlaid this fortnight with a stratum of new incidents; a month hence he could not resurrect it if he would — and it would tell well at the club, pointed with a bit of humor — Clark winced.

When he caught the trend of old Brantley's rambling monologue he was saying: "'N' her ma, Martha McGuion as was, turned th' head uv ever' man in Pike 'n' Morgan and ended up with er shotgun wedding!"

The moon rode low in the sky ahead of Clark as he drove rapidly toward the steamboat landing. The air was dank with the cold dew of dawn and heavy with perfume. Somewhere in the tangle of mimosa at his side a mocking-bird sung low in its throat and a whippoorwill wailed insistently.

In a deep cut where the hedges rose black against the sky, the horse shied violently, almost dragging Clark from his seat, as a white shape sprang into

the road. Before the frightened horse had come fairly to a stand Clark had flung himself down to meet her. Her thin clothing was saturated with damp, and she shivered convulsively, her bosom rising and falling with a storm of sobs that shook Clark as he clasped her. They clung to each other in silence, Clark's head bent down upon the girl's wet face.

"You little liar!" he said caressingly, his voice shaking under its attempted playfulness.

"'F — 'f they had er let me be," she broke out hoarsely, tears coming again, "I could er" —

"I know, dear," he soothed her, "I know what your plan must have been. Never mind it now. — How came you here?"

"I was waiting fur you," wearily.

She shivered again and winced as he laid his hand upon her shoulder, and with startled eyes and a sick premonition of what he would see, Clark drew her where the light from the waning moon fell upon her. She had been cruelly beaten; the strokes of the lash had stiffened in streaks of blood across her thin gown. As Clark's eyes fell upon her, for the first time in all his smug, well-ordered life an oath burst from his lips.

He looked back along the dark road that led to what, in cruel mockery of its real meaning, she called her home, then downward to the girl upon his breast; hung a second longer in troubled thought;

then tearing off his coat he wrapped her in it and lifted her to the seat, sprang up himself, and brought the whip down across the horse.

"We'll have to drive like the deuce to make the boat," he said quietly.

CHAPTER IV

" . . . Wherever light winds blow
Fixed by no friendly star."

In the second winter of the Development Company's being, the boom so long heralded with dauntless mendacity by Morganton's financial chaperones began to assume a tangible aspect.

The stars in their courses fought for the Development Company in those days, and, to quote Carlysle, the Company did "some pretty d—— shrewd hustling" on its own account.

"They have seen our star in the East, Kate," he confided to his wife, with cheerful profanity, "and have come to dicker with us!"

And, in fact, wise men began to arrive from the East; not upon camels to be sure, nor noticeably laden with gold, frankincense, and myrrh; but they had brought their own jovial personalities, their evening clothes, and a particularly long-headed, if somewhat jocular, insight to bear upon the concerns of the debutante investment, and for the moment that sufficed. The main thing with the Company had been to get them there, its methods being equal in sapiency to the old-time recipe for chicken salad which starts off, "First catch your chicken."

So the officers of the Company smoked the calumet, and the Eastern potentates fared sumptuously every day upon soft-shelled crab and canvas-backed duck, — which the management of the hotel, with a frank forecast of the part a man's palate plays in matters presumably settled by his judgment, ordered up in an endless chain from the coast, — and were visibly impressed by the outlook. This outlook, by the way, was duly enlarged by excursions about the country in Carlysle's motor car; and, with Jane's charming figure by his side and her sweet nonsense in his delighted ears, it is small wonder that the gods of finance from Wall Street's "high Parnassus" looked upon the daughters of men and found them fair; or that, interpreted by her, they carried back East an impression of a land where falls of incalculable potential did lofty tumbling acts from peaks stuffed with ore, and endless coal-fields which echoed only to the plovers' call and to the whistle of Bob-Bob-White; of forests of hardwood trees glowing like camp-fires through the haze of Indian summer; and all this, to cap the munificence of the gods, set in a climate where men wear shirt-sleeves nine months in the year.

But during all this time of fatness in the land the star of the Chinquepin Power Company lingered obstinately below the horizon, invisible except to the eyes of Carlysle's indomitable hope.

Chinquepin still sang her siren song and swirled

her lacy skirts all day in the sunshine, unwitting of scoops or paddles. Lovers still sat on "th' courtin' rock" behind her fall, and Carlysle still taxed the vituperative powers of the English language for terms in which to anathematize old Jourdan's thick-headed adherence to the altars of his sires, as he chose to interpret that worthy's inflexible refusal to even hold a conference with the Company's agents.

There was a bit of the sleuth in Carlysle, for all his delightful mental suppleness and the easy catholicism which made for him usually so comfortable a place among the creeds and customs of other men, and it held him to the trail of the Chinquepin deal in the face of old Jourdan's implacable obduracy, with a vigilance that neither slumbered nor slept, and an unflagging keenness of resource that went nearly the whole way with Brantley in persuading him to undertake one last attempt to open negotiations.

"Does this darned old moss-back suppose he will be let to block the progress of a whole state?" demanded Carlysle, in bitter chagrin, as the two sat together in his office upon the morning when Brantley had rowed down the river to communicate his last failure. "This is a public measure, I tell you, Brantley! It will benefit the whole State of Alabama. And he can't hold out, you know; as soon as we get this bill through we will force the concession."

"Colonel DeResett's th' member fum this dees-trict?" hazarded Brantley mildly.

"Yes; John Calhoun DeResett."

Carlysle glanced searchingly at the other, but Brantley wore his usual expression of gentle satire, too universal to be personal or to convey any information, as in the present instance.

"Jourd was in th' colonel's regi*mint* endurin' th' wah," he dropped meditatively, "'n' Jourd votes all his hands solid fur th' colonel ever' two years."

"I know DeResett," said Carlysle, with brief conclusiveness; "he works that racket about the 'wah' in his campaigns, but when it comes to the really serious things of life — say Chinquepin stock — his head's level! What is Jourdan's real reason, Brantley? Drop all this rot about the war, man, that's past, and put me on."

Brantley's eyes steadied as they met Carlysle's, and for a moment it seemed as if he was about to retaliate, but the impulse of courage faded into caution; he took refuge in a generality.

"Jourd 's ben erginst ever'thing in Gawd A'mighty's world sence th' creation er man down to th' or*gani*zation uv this here Development Company," he said evasively.

"What soured him on the scheme of creation?" inquired Carlysle, hoping to find a loop-hole in "Jourd's" universal pessimism.

"Befo' th' wah," began Brantley, — and Carlysle settled himself with amused resignation to the fate he had rashly invited, — "befo' th' wah Jourd was er nigger overseer on Lacey McGuion's plantations; 'n' " — he proceeded equably — "in them days nigger overseer was n't no better 'n dawgs — hardly. But Jourd, for all that, upped and run off with Marthy McGuion — yes, as you say, 'th' lady uv th' manor!' Some say 't was er military wedding; others say not; ennyhow," — with easy tolerance, — "he *ended* by marryin' her. 'N' " — this in slow summary — "Marthy McGuion would er twisted th' grain er Julius Cæsar!"

"Is that how he got the land?" asked Carlysle, making a rapid forecast of the story, "all the McGuions killed in the war" —

"Exactly."

"Well." Carlysle resumed the genealogy of the McGuion family with smiling exasperation. What, he asked himself, had he to gain? But he baited Brantley with another question.

"Marthy McGuion died?"

"In time she did," acquiesced Brantley, with an air of generously refraining from calling attention to an oversight of Providence.

"And left the land to her husband?"

"Onconditionally."

"Now," mused Carlysle alertly, "whom do you suppose" —

Brantley rose with a stiff creak, his cheeks creased like a leather pouch in a smile of gentle derision. "I 'm nigh on to seventy, son," he said, with his rusty chuckle that always suggested the need of oil, "'n' I ain't got th' time to be 'supposin' erbout Jourd! But h'sover, I 'm sorry I did n't marry Marthy m'self when I had th' chanst, seein' as your heart 's so sot on that bit er fallin' water."

As the door closed behind Brantley Carlysle flung himself back in his chair, thinking out the details of the letter he must perforce write quashing the last hopes of the Chinquepin Company. He was still lost in angry meditation when the click of the door opening without warning made him wheel abruptly toward it.

"I 'm very busy," he began mechanically, when something in the woman's air arrested him. He decided swiftly that this was a countrywoman who probably wanted to sell him land, but before he could speak she took him up gravely.

"You was n't doing er single thing but laying back in that chair."

"I beg your pardon," said Carlysle, a good deal taken aback; "I assure you I was arranging a most important matter in my mind. Do you wish to speak to me, Madam?" He added the last word a little uncertainly.

"Air you Mr. James Stanwell Carlysle?" No

faintest tinge of embarrassment showed in the colorless apathy of her tone.

"Yes," said Carlysle.

"'N' does ever'thing from th' ground below to th' sky erbove belong to you?" she pursued, in the skeptical tone of one repeating information in which she had herself no sort of confidence.

"Yes," said Carlysle again, this time with a smile. "Do you want to buy something of mine or sell me something of yours?"

His visitor did not respond to his smile, but she came nearer to his desk and leaned her arms with the child in them rather wearily upon it. The eyes with which she met his own were perfectly steady and, except for a slight tension in their gaze, normal; but as Carlysle's eyes traveled from them to her mouth, one of the mobile, tremulous, betraying mouths, it suddenly came to him that the woman was at her last fence. The face itself belonged to the stubborn, fighting type of faces, spite of its flexuous lines and rounded contours, now worn and blanched so that he seemed to see down to the primitive rock of her character, laid bare by suffering, so frank as to be almost nakedly elemental. Carlysle winced with pity.

"Not neither," she said at last, in answer to his smiling question and in the same tone of colorless apathy. "I ain't got nothin' to buy nothin' with; and I ain't got nothin' to sell, lessen you 'd take the baby?"

Carlysle glanced quickly at her as he recovered his poise, somewhat shaken under the many-piled negations of her speech, but she was perfectly grave; there was even a thread of dignity, pathetically attenuated, in her confession, as if in some sort of way her poverty clothed her with a pathetic state. To Carlysle's amazement she made him an offer of the child, timid and half withdrawn, but unmistakedly serious in intention.

"Sit down," said he gently, taking the child from her. "Why do you wish to give me your child?"

She did not answer in words, but her eyes met his in reproachful protest so startling in its frank disclosure that a pang of vicarious guilt stung Carlysle; he felt in some inexplicable way that his sex made him an accomplice in her fall. It was but the instantaneous throb with which the molecule recognizes its kinship to the mass of human misery and crime and guilt, and Carlysle in that instant of poignant comprehension saw himself a boy again with the ruthless barbarism of boyhood turning a burning glass upon a butterfly, pretty much as Nature had focused her inexorable purpose upon this young creature.

"You have n't told me what I can do for you?" he suggested, smiling at the child upon his knee.

"I want you to loan me er box car," she replied, without hesitation. Carlysle considered her in surprised silence for a moment.

"What to do with?"

"To live in, uv course." The explanation was distinctly tart.

"You mean those empty cars on that bit of construction track" —

"Yes."

Carlysle hesitated, running over in his mind any possible refuge for her in the place; there was none he knew. And yet this child — she seemed hardly more — alone, in a box car in such a place. The thought was preposterous!

"Where have you come from here?" he temporized.

"She-car-go," she drawled sweetly and so unexpectedly that Carlysle's glance took on a tinge of keenness as he made a guarded inventory of her. She wore a dark gown that, though worn and travel-stained, had been distinctly smart in its day, and still bore the unmistakable evidences of its high estate in its well-cut lines and good texture. But the girl herself was worn and weary and slender to the point of emaciation, though her face retained its childish contours; there was a dimple in her chin and shadows, that would be dimples when she smiled, in either cheek, though the cheeks were themselves pallid from want. She answered indifferently to his question that her name was Callie Larkin.

"Of course you can have the car; I will send out

and have it shunted closer to these shanties near the tracks; that will be safer for you."

Carlysle had been scribbling a line as he talked, and now held it toward her with a note from his purse.

"Take this to the Company's supply store and they will let you have what you want."

She took the paper, but flushed and shrank from the money that he pressed upon her.

"It is all right for me to help you a bit," he explained. "This is my town, you remember? And while you are here you are my guest."

"Air you th' mayor?" she inquired, with a touch of awe; and when Carlysle told her with a smile that he was, she took the money contentedly, and with a word of thanks went her way.

It was thus that Callie Larkin had come into the lives of Carlysle and his little circle. He had sketched her in a dozen capable sentences to his wife and Miss Caruth, and they had later sought her out in her tiny home upon the unused track. She had settled into it, never leaving it, and shrinking from her neighbors with a persistence that soon rid her of them, and as the weeks passed she showed no desire to leave it. Carlysle's order upon the Company's store supplied her simple needs. She made no friends nor even acquaintances; to all save Carlysle and his wife she was frankly repellent, and she clung to them as unobtrusively as a bit of

thistledown might cling to a traveler's garment; she made no appeal, asserted no claim, but simply and quite frankly attached herself to them, though she did not confide in them nor did they question her.

To Carlysle life displayed itself episodically; he snatched its meaning from it with a glance as he did the morning papers, giving himself no concern with yesterday's stale news or to-morrow's unripe happenings. And as the summer wore on it was gradually borne in upon him and his wife that the lethargy that had locked the girl's nature like a frost-bound stream had broken; she had shed her past as a flower might shed its leaves, and trembled upon the verge of a new phase. That she had accepted them as an equivalent for all that life had doubtless held for her before the wrench came that had jarred her from her little niche was also apparent to them, and the knowledge had touched them, disconcerted them, and amused them in about equal parts, though they had not hesitated to assume the responsibility that she gently, almost timidly, thrust upon them. Her theory of life had been contained in the reply that she made to Carlysle's inquiry as to what she could do, or would prefer to do, to earn a support for herself and her child. She had turned great, startled eyes upon him as she murmured,—

"Folkses has always tuk ker uv me, 'n'—'n' I ken take ker uv th' baby."

After that Carlysle and his wife had tacitly assumed the part of "th' folkses." She accepted what they did for her with a detached graciousness, that just escaped being inconsequence, but did escape it by a certain grace of manner which assumed her obligation to the Carlysles to be an accident that might quite as well have been the other way, which graciousness was unconsciously the acme of good taste, since the stress of circumstances really left her no choice for the moment but to be their debtor. Carlysle frankly admired what he called her "grit," and his wife and Miss Caruth were interested though more conservatively. They had found early in their acquaintance with her that it was impossible to accept Callie at any valuation other than her own; light as she seemed by nature, she maintained a rigid reticence in regard to her past that never relaxed. Experience had laid a rough hand upon her, but she had wrested herself free, courageously or callously Carlysle and his wife in their many discussions had never yet been able to decide which; life had striven to brand its most tragic superscription upon her, but the die had seemingly left no stamp.

The question was — and it grew more insistent with every week that passed — what to do with her? She had neither a past nor a future, and her hold upon the present was so casual a one that she might almost be said to have no present either. It was in these somewhat perplexing premises that Carlysle

and the two women had set themselves to play the part of destiny and assist fate to solve the problem, by providing her with a future while holding fast to the tentative claim they had upon her, not daring to risk her life in her own hands until some sort of life line attached her to the shore of the problematical future they had mapped out for her.

To Carlysle's dismay he perceived that his two companions, and in a measure Callie herself, saw her past as a nagging repetend in the solution of her future, repeating itself to infinity; never to be completely solved and never to be cut off or approximated or in any way got rid of, but re-lived in the background of every minute of her future.

Then all in a moment, as it were, had come the inspiration. A man—a perfect stranger to Carlysle—in the clutch of that instinct of confidence that goes so far along the way to make us believe in the universal brotherhood of man, had unfolded to him the story of his life from the first blind cast of the dice down to his wife's good-by kiss when he had left her to come upon the journey that ended in his meeting with Carlysle and his confidence to him. How, flung back upon himself by a woman, distrusting himself, the whole world, yet determined to have his share of plain human happiness at least, he had staked his all upon blind chance and won!

The idea grew upon Carlysle; here was a solution,

a logical, reasonable solution of the girl's problem of life. She had bungled the first part of the problem. What was there to do but wipe the slate clean and begin anew? And this time *he* would state the terms; and what is a man's judgment worth if, knowing the world as he knew it, he could not do as simple a piece of business as this promised to be? To select a husband for this girl was but a simple exercise of the same faculties by which he selected his own business partners and associates — not requiring half so much keenness and acumen as to be president of the Development Company!

CHAPTER V

"She should never have looked at me if she meant I should not love her!
There are plenty — men you call such I suppose — she may discover
All her soul to if she pleases, and yet leave much as she found them:
But I'm not so; and she knew it when she fixed me glancing round them."

COOLER weather brought back the scattered members of the little colony of Eastern folk from their old-time haunts, and Mrs. Carlysle was in a state of ecstatic, sighing contentment over the social prospects for the winter. She and Miss Caruth stopped at Carlysle's offices to fetch him home to lunch upon a glorious day in October when the golden air was like iced Tokay, and found him in a mood which they privately dubbed "gentle dalliance." They were themselves in radiant spirits, and in visiting dress, and were, as they hastened to inform him, returning from rounding up the inhabitants.

"We 've taken the census, Jim, and everybody has come back, and nearly everybody has brought somebody else with them. The Marches and the Van Coots both have visiting girls, and — oh, that unspeakable widow from the farm across the river" —

"Say plantation, dear; they like it better."

"— Plantation, is coming back, gowns and all! She told Jim that she put six bales of cotton into every gown!"

"She told me that in the middle of a transaction in real estate in which she did me outrageously!" observed Carlysle.

"She 's a gibbering idiot, you know, Jane," supplemented his wife, with a smile at Carlysle.

"— Until it comes to real estate, I grant you; but the shrewdest broker I ever did business with is not a patch upon her when it comes to land!"

"The only thing I can tolerate about her is her sex," summed up Mrs. Carlysle serenely, "and that only because we are so short of women in the dances. But we will have enough this winter without putting in any men — so poky!"

"Things are looking well for the Company too," said Carlysle cheerily. "Graeham has given things a stir" —

"Not another *man*, Jim!" moaned his wife, in tragic despair, "just when I had succeeded in getting enough women for a decent dance. If new men are coming in *all* the time, Jim, I don't see *how* I am to do!"

"Graeham 's been here some time; you need n't count him in — he 's not a society man; at least he said," went on Carlysle, flattered rather than warned by the quickened interest of his two companions,

"that women were n't in it for him; he 's here for business, and he does n't care to be hampered"—

"Had not some one better tell Mr. Graeham that there are just exactly twenty-five men in Morganton to every woman?" interposed Miss Caruth suavely.

"Graeham knows the ratio of population, you may depend," grinned Carlysle; "he 's an uncommonly shrewd fellow. He probably does n't care for society where men are ninety-six points off. He 's not in the least your sort, girls," he added carelessly, "though very much *my* sort. He has just what the Company needs,—cash and the grit to let it go. I 'll show him to you in the dining-room."

And as they took their seats he indicated the table next but one to their own, and Jane glanced carelessly across. The man sat with his face toward their table in a pose at once alert and absent, leaning slightly forward in his seat, and he met Jane's careless glance with an uncompromising directness that had the impact almost of a blow. Graeham's eyes were deeply set and wide apart, under a brow whose frowning earnestness was well in character with his glance, that was as straight and level as though sighting along a rifle barrel, and, at the moment it met Miss Caruth's, full of an enigmatical challenge not inconceivable as a component of a glance reinforced by the coercive argument of a rifle barrel behind it, but distinctly disconcerting when directed point-blank into a pair of lovely shrinking

eyes, across a dining table, and that from a perfect stranger. It was an inexplicable glance, and though it lasted but while a man might draw his breath one time, Jane was conscious in that instant that she had been weighed by some implacable standard of the man's own, and found wanting, notwithstanding that its keen summary was tempered by a trace of ironical admiration. It was frankly antagonistic also, with the antagonism of a man who knows his quarrel just, and Miss Caruth had a nettled consciousness that the shock of it had sent the blood to her cheek. Her eyes, changing their focus without turning from him, passed easily over him, beyond him, and dropped back to her plate in masterly retreat. She turned to Peter Clark, who sat at her side, with a careless question.

"What is Mr. Graeham doing here?"

A laughing retort sprang to the lips of both men simultaneously; Clark nodded precedence to Carlysle.

"Doing Peter!" exclaimed he, in a guarded tone of amusement, mitigated by a pleasant glance at Clark. "Did you up in several deals, didn't he, Peter?"

"Something like it," Clark acquiesced.

"Machiavelli worsted!" Jane's eyes laughed, but Clark at her side caught a gleam of sympathy. "He does not look in the least diplomatic," she added carelessly.

"Oh — diplomatic!" Clark's imperceptible shrug italicized his tone. "Diplomacy was n't in this; it was brutal cash and unscrupulous aggressiveness. Not," he went on pleasantly, "not but what Graeham has a sort of rough-and-tumble cleverness. I believe" — with well-bred acrimony — "it is called 'hustling' among his sort of financiers."

"What sort *is* his sort, Peter?" inquired Mrs. Carlysle anxiously, adding explicatively, "If Jim were not president I should not bother, but I really feel that I should know the different brands of aggressiveness, at least."

"What I meant," began Clark, laughing and floundering under Carlysle's delighted grin, "is that — er — Really, you know, Mrs. Carlysle, I meant to be ironical. The point is that Western men as a rule do not finesse in business; they go right at a thing with a knock-down directness that is somewhat er — disconcerting."

Carlysle gave him a noiseless round of applause. "'Disconcerting' is good, Peter! What Graeham really did, girls, was to put Clark in his pocket and walk off with him."

Both women made a soft, inarticulate sound of commiseration.

"Poor, poor Peter!" sighed Mrs. Carlysle, looking at the young man as a mother might look at her boy's bruised knee. "How nobly he bears it! How can you keep from flinging something at him,

Peter? Ogre! sitting there with poor Peter in his pocket!"

"But it is remarkable, Carlysle," Clark resumed, after a grateful glance at his champion, "the difference in Eastern financiering and the method of men from — er, from these new places."

"What 'new place' is Mr. Graeham from?" inquired Miss Caruth. "Or do we regard him as continentally new?" There was a delicate tang of malice in her tone that was as balm to Clark's hidden rancor.

"Mexico," he said in a soft aside; soft simply for the pleasure of the pretended confidence between them.

"Mexico *new!*" cried Mrs. Carlysle. "Why, when I went to school" —

"They don't have time to be subtle in the West," Carlysle cut across his wife's geographical reminiscences, with a smile. "There 's such a deuced lot to do out there. With us conditions already exist. — How did you say Graeham made his pile?"

"Hydro-electrical engineering. He is president of the Necaxa Company out there, or was at one time."

"'Hydro —!'" gasped Mrs. Carlysle, in shocked amazement. "Come, Jane! If Peter and Jim are going to use language of *this* sort in your presence — it does n't matter about *me;* I 'm married! but" —a delicious laugh drew Graeham's eyes, in

spite of himself, for a moment to the table — "I think you might respect Jane's innocence and my — curiosity!"

"I will tell you anything on earth that I know or am capable of inventing, Mrs. Carlysle," promised Clark recklessly. "Just let me know!"

"How — did — you — say — Mr. Graeham — made — his — pile?" spacing the words with peremptory little nods.

"Oh, that? Very simply. He whistled a river across a mountain and made it jump over, plunk! into a power plant," concluded Clark, and gave his attention to his neglected luncheon.

"Well, Peter? 'Plunk into a power plant.' What then?"

"He lighted up a bunch of towns with it."

"With a river!" Mrs. Carlysle's voice ran the scale of incredulity and ended with a gasp of reproach. "Peter!"

Graeham, lingering over his coffee, suppressed a smile as he stole a glance across to the other table whose occupants, in the interest of the moment, had let their voices rise above the note of the dining-room.

"It 's no harm listening," thought Graeham; "they seem not to care if I am included in their confidences! How deuced knowing Clark is, by the way, and how pretty the women are! The one in brown velvet, she 's furious with me; and I was

a bit of a brute. Pretty? No; pretty is not her word. What is it? She 's more like a delicate steel coil with a current through it than anything else."

"Self-made man, I suppose?" said Carlysle, at the other table, his eyes, full of interest, upon Clark's face, unconscious of Graeham as he rose, his face stiffening, to pass out of the room; but he could not escape Clark's reply nor what followed.

"That!" Clark's uplifted brows annotated his brief reply. "It 's all over him."

"The regular picture-paper Westerner," laughed Miss Caruth lightly, daintily peeling a peach with down-drooped eyelashes, "with an unthinkable tie; labeled, 'Begun life as office boy at thirty cents a week!'"

The little dart, barbed by girlish malice, flew straight to its mark. Graeham's head lifted in an involuntary impulse of anger, though his lips quivered with amusement. How well she had scored, and how promptly. He let his eyes rest a moment on the laughing lips that uttered the gibe, and though Miss Caruth had not raised her eyes from her fingers, busied with the peach, she knew that her shaft had found its mark, and the smile that she felt, rather than saw, told her that it rankled.

Miss Caruth was very thoroughly enjoying her winter "in the country," as she termed the enlight-

ened and progressive municipality of Morganton, for though society in any sense to which she had been accustomed was impossible, Morganton had a charm very distinctly its own. The atmosphere of the little colony was thoroughly virile and stimulating, as social atmosphere always is where the realities of life very closely underlie social intercourse between men and women. Women shared the business interests of their men friends, for the reason that little else was going forward in the embryonic town, and undeniably it imparts a decided fillip to a woman's society if her usual charm is supplemented by a knowledge of the subject most vitally interesting to the man. A woman's point of view in business is nearly always piquantly unexpected to a man, and very refreshing after the sordid grind of the real thing; nor does the wise business man disdain the side lights cast by her instantaneous perceptions of men and motives —and her partisanship is so delightfully illogical and illogically winning! The Carlysles were the pivot about which revolved a gay little circle of vigorous-minded, breezy-natured people, alive to their fingers' ends with the joy of living in this comfortable, commonplace old world, and with brains teeming with plans to secure the wherewithal for further and keener enjoyment of the good things to be found in it. Their creed was a delightfully simple one: Live and work and get as much fun as possible out of both.

The getting of money was, frankly, Morganton's *raison d'être*, but there was none of the vicious, brutal lust for mere raw accumulation that distinguishes the Western mining towns from the "boom" towns of the South that have arisen upon the ashes of as suave a civilization as the world has ever known. Morganton was, in fact, the materialization of a well-considered financial scheme, and the men handling it were financiers, not red-shirted miners grubbing for pay-gravel. The men at Morganton had come to stay; they had brought their altars and their gods and their wives, their creeds and their cynicisms and their business methods; they did not waste time with sowing the seeds of Eastern civilization; they had brought the full-grown plant along, wrapped in wet moss, to be transplanted in a soil rank with traditions of hate for them and all they stood for.

The little town was precisely like a slice of an Eastern city set down bodily amid the cotton-fields of Alabama, a core of resistless energy amid the enervation and decay of rural life of the South.

It is very certain that the unrestrained freedom of the out-of-doors life contributed largely to Miss Caruth's enjoyment of her winter in Alabama, for nature was very neighborly with man at Morganton in those days, and Jane was emphatically an open-air young woman and full of the reposeful charm of the life that flows around our incompleteness.

There were times when the deep core of feeling hidden beneath the girl's reserve actually ached for the bland touch of nature's comforting abstractions.

Miss Caruth's serene poise had been strangely shaken by her inexplicable encounter with Graeham, for his insistent personality had had the force almost of an encounter, and dislike, antagonism in the eyes of a perfect stranger, makes quite as strong an appeal to interest and curiosity as an involuntary attraction; and Miss Caruth was restlessly conscious, in the days that followed her odd subjective interview with Graeham across the dinner table, that she had swung ever so little, it might be, from her emotional equilibrium — pretty much as a compass might veer in the neighborhood of a magnet.

She resented the impingement of Graeham's personality upon her own indignantly; shrank from it as an intrusion, haughtily insulated herself in an armor of freezing indifference. But to no purpose; her armor proved itself pervious, sprang leaks, acted provokingly like a conductor in fact, so that the antagonism and dumb resistance that hung like an electrified atmosphere about Graeham charged her mind, spite of her coolly unattached attitude, with a hostile interest in him which kept her restlessly sensitive to his presence in the hotel. Her ear took cognizance of his step in the corridor, strive as she would to snub her palpitating consciousness into oblivion; she caught herself listening for his voice,

his laugh, amid the blur of men's voices in the hotel lobby, and recognizing it with an irrational throb of what she called "dislike."

Graeham's rooms were opposite Carlysle's suite, and naturally enough there were encounters between the inmates in the corridors, marked always upon Jane's part by an imperceptibly tilted chin and lashes poised at an angle nicely calculated to exclude a man's figure and impress upon him the withering conviction that higher than six inches or so of trousers he had no corporeal existence. But Graeham, upon his part, never failed to vigorously assert his right to an entity by a quick steady glance that grasped the girl like a hand and left her breathless and indignant as from an actual contact.

Graeham's voice and glance possessed the quality of projecting his personality thus to quite a remarkable degree, and after a fortnight of this silent interchange of hostility Miss Caruth discovered to her dismay that Graeham had established not only his right to an entity but to a place in her emotional consciousness as well.

Then Miss Caruth had rebelled in earnest, and with flushed cheeks and straightened lip had said things to herself that were really not altogether kind or just. She had asked herself, among other scathing inquiries, if it could be possible that this was Miss Caruth who had studied man and his functions for five seasons! And how could it be that she had allowed

herself to forget that men in hotels, strange men, all men in fact not introduced by her chaperone, were impossible in any sense, and unthinkable in all senses, and to girls of her sort practically invisible as well.

It was only when the perception, that strengthened with every hurried, gloomy, perturbed glance that Graeham cast in the direction of their table, that she was herself a centre of emotional disturbance to him had become certainty that Miss Caruth recovered her poise and with it control of the situation. The knowledge brought with it a tranquilizing sense of the proper relativity of things, and she proceeded to outline a series of experiments to ascertain just how far out of plumb Graeham might have swung in her direction.

These experiments were conducted during dinner for the most part, and with the unswerving instinct with which women gauge a man's susceptibility proceeded along the line of Graeham's least resistance, and were carried on by means of various gowns that the young woman had thriftily decided not to waste upon the desert air of Morganton, but to carry back East in all their pristine Paris freshness; but which, in the interest of her experiment, she dedicated to her researches with reckless disregard. One in particular was a delicately gorgeous affair of pale primrose yellow, like a summer sunrise, and against its soft luxuriance of color Jane's delicate

duskiness — a duskiness that had no tinge of brown, but was more the exquisite half tones of twilight, deepening to the coming night in eyes and hair, with the faint rose in the West repeated in her lips — was accented into an effect of subdued radiance. She wore yellow primroses in her corsage, and the delicate odor stole across to Graeham, seated in lonely state at his table, followed from time to time by a fleeting glance that, light as it was and serenely detached, took note of the progress of her experiment; for Jane was a woman first of all, however much she might suggest in her saffron robes a star trembling upon the verge of dawn; and, though the casual eye would have detected naught beyond the fact that Graeham was neglecting his dinner, she seemed satisfied.

Graeham's strong, pugnacious face was a trifle paler, the frowning earnestness of his brow a shade sterner perhaps, and his glance, that continually sought the next table, had the brooding firmness of a man who weighs himself against a force he fears may be too strong for him.

"I'm going to give in," the glance said, "but I'll be hanged if I knock under without a struggle. There's fight in me yet!"

But the next day Graeham's place at table was empty. He had gone East for a fortnight, Carlysle volunteered. Miss Caruth made no reply and no audible comment, though she may have allowed her-

self a mental reflection upon the conservative pugnacity that fights and runs away.

For the first few days of his absence an empty peace that was not ungrateful had replaced the palpitating inner life she had been leading, but as the days went on, by imperceptible degrees the peace departed, the emptiness deepened; the Paris gowns remained upon their pegs, and Miss Caruth and Billy Boy went far afield in the bright short winter days; the girl with brooding eyes and bitten lip, half in a dream, half in troubled introspection, striving to unwind the gossamer threads of her being that had been, all against her will, caught up by the floating filaments of Graeham's and twisted into a psychological cable impalpable as thought and tenacious as steel. Her thoughts were still dreamily following this new train that led always to Graeham's face, with its level glance full of controlled impetuosity, his wide, sensitive lips showing passion and idealism, as she drew in her rein at the end of a glorious gallop some ten days after Graeham's evanishment and sat looking down from the crest of the last long swell beyond the river to where the little town like a pile of toy blocks lay strewn upon the dun carpet of the fields. It was time for home already, but Jane was loath to exchange the soft bloom of night beginning to grow upon the fields, the blurred sepia of the woods against the flaming west, with the evening star pricking the green ether

above it, for the bright bustle of the hotel dinner hour.

Her cheeks showed a splendid scarlet, for the wind, her boon companion while the sun shone, had turned sullen as his playfellow slipped away and nipped shrewdly as she at last gave Billy Boy his head across the fields toward the pike, which like an index finger pointed reprovingly toward home.

Billy Boy, albeit slightly surprised at the direction, knowing well enough that they were several fields farther out than the panel of rail fence where they usually made their leap back into the pike, having been less engrossed with the tender charm of the coming night than his rider, nevertheless took his head right willingly, feeling the good red blood pricking in him and his resilient muscles spurning the fields, and rose, nothing loath, gallantly to the stiff leap, landing clear of the gully concealed from Jane by the creepers on the fence, but with a shock and scramble that all but lost Miss Caruth her seat. She picked him up cleverly, and for a moment all seemed well, until with a qualm of wretched foreboding she felt the horse give way beneath her. Jane was off and at his side in a moment, but spite of soothing pats from tender hands, and even a soft cheek laid against his hairy one, with words of cheer mingled with reckless promises of future dainties, Billy only staggered a couple of stiff steps and with

drooping head stood still with the unutterably forlorn aspect of a horse who knows himself done.

Miss Caruth endeavored to look the uncompromising situation bravely in the eye, but a quiver of dismay caught her breath as she thought of the seven miles of empty pike that lay between her and the hotel, with the edge of day fast slipping away behind the belt of dark woods. Still, grim and callous as the pike looked, it was her only hope for help, and creeping upon the bank Jane seated herself as closely as possible to her horse for company, to wait, with the best cheer possible, the turn of fortune's obstinate and creaky wheel.

A streak of cold orange in the west still lighted the upper world, but the rime of dark lay heavy on the fields, and in the intense silence the swing of the planet into the shadow of the coming night could almost be felt. The wind rose, marching sturdily down the pike, driving an army of fugitives before it; dead leaves, breathless and harried, and a half-empty cotton bole like the ghost of a Molly-Cottontail fled before it. Overhead the diamond drills of a few early stars were beginning to pierce the floor of the sky. The quavering call of a screech-owl, like a wee brown banshee abroad upon the night, came from the woods. And somewhere along the road in the direction of the river came a smooth swish and rush, invisible and scarce audible, but sufficient to bring Jane with a joyous bound to her feet. Car-

lysle's was the only motor car in Morganton, as she well knew, and she gayly made ready to hail him. But what niggardly light yet lingered was enough to show her, as the car drew out of the shadows, that it was not Carlysle's car, nor was the man's figure wrapped in a heavy coat Carlysle's. Miss Caruth subsided into as small a bundle under Billy's neck as possible, and left the issue with fate, as the car slowed up a bit uncertainly.

"Hallo!" said a man's pleasant voice, that sent a startled quiet through Jane's bounding nerves as though a hand had been laid upon their quivering centre. "Is anything wrong?" went on the pleasant voice, with a note of blunt comradeship very good to hear.

"Nothing *very* wrong." Jane was conscious that her voice was absurdly small and sounded slightly ashamed, and she tried to make it braver as she went on. "My horse has hurt his leg and I'm stopping here with him — that's all."

"Quite enough, I should say!" Graeham lifted his cap as he stopped beside Jane.

"Miss Caruth, is it?"

"Yes."

"My name is Graeham." He proffered the information stiffly, restive under the necessity for introducing himself.

"I have seen you before, Mr. Graeham," commented Miss Caruth suavely, yet with a trace of the

obviousness of one who says that he has seen the Brooklyn bridge. Her faint smile was reflected more broadly by Graeham's.

"Something like one hundred and eighty times, not counting chance encounters in the corridor," he said, with blunt good nature. "But I'm in great luck to have happened along just now.— Gently, boy, gently! Hurts, eh?"

He was examining the horse as he spoke, with the assured touch that horses love. "He 's not much hurt," he said carelessly, as he tied the reluctant and depressed Billy Boy to the fence. "I 'll send back for him from the next farm, and take you along now. Come" — he held out his hand to Miss Caruth with something of the blunt patronage of a big boy to a smaller, as he spoke. His voice and manner were absolutely lacking in the deference which men unconsciously show to women of Miss Caruth's class, and if it had been apparent to her, with his first reluctant motion toward his cap, that Graeham was not accustomed to the care of women, his next act made her abundantly aware of it.

"I have no rug," he said, as Jane seated herself, "but my coat will do capitally."

He did not ask her to allow his coat the pleasure nor himself the honor of serving her; he assumed her assent to his proposition, upon the basis of common sense, seemingly, and answered her polite demur by dropping the coat bunglingly about her so that

she was literally swamped under its weight and sank, laughing helplessly, into the seat. Graeham sprang to extricate her with a repentant earnestness and vigor that only added to her mirth.

"I'm a dolt when it comes to women," he said after a moment, and with a coolness that saved the situation for him, though Jane had divined his chagrin, "as I've just proved! But I had n't any idea, really, what a clumsy brute I could be. I see now. It should be held off, so. May I try again? Thank you."

He eased the coat down gently so that it settled in folds about her, and glanced naïvely at Miss Caruth for her approval. She gave it graciously.

"Very clever," she assured him, with a smile. "But, of course, you would not be quite so deliberate ordinarily. In public, you know," — this with soft didacticism, — "it should be done without the smallest fuss. There is nothing that so bores a woman as to be fussed over" — an imperceptible break which Graeham passed over in the earnestness of his attention — "in public."

"I see. Thank you. I 'd catch on quite easily if I had you to give me a tip now and then. May I try to button it?"

"Yes," said Jane, and deftly assisted him so that this time the lesson went off to Graeham's immense satisfaction, though Miss Caruth heard the tense breath he drew as the last button went home.

"Did n't you ever before?" she asked, as she met his smile, at once deprecating and congratulatory, and was instantly sorry that she had asked.

"Lend my coat to a girl? No." He paused curtly, and gave his attention to the car, and for a moment a frost of silence chilled the previous moment of understanding. Jane watched the rail fences, that like lean, spined serpents kept pace beside the car, and Graeham looked straight ahead.

"I avoid women as a rule," said he abruptly, taking up the word where he had dropped it, "and in circumstances such as these I naturally pay the penalty."

He still stared straight ahead, and behind the collar of the coat Jane watched him with smiling, speculative eyes. There was something distinctly racy in Graeham's frankly unattached virility, the blunt candor of which robbed it of the slightest suspicion of posing.

"The game" — he resumed presently, his explicative tone just dashed with anxiety lest Jane might not fully understand that his policy was one of deliberate choice and not lack of perception — "the game has never seemed to me to be worth the candle."

The frank abstraction of his tone; perhaps, too, something in the crisp, mellow tones themselves, made a personal application impossible. Miss Caruth held aside the collar of the coat and showed him her face full of saucy pleading.

"Don't!" she murmured demurely. "Please don't say any more! If you do I shall be bound to assert the dignity of my sex and get out upon the road — and it's so awfully dark and cold!"

"I'm not rabid," said he, with a smile and a quick glance that stabbed to the heart of the situation. "And please understand that when I say 'avoid' I'm speaking of the social phase. In this particular instance I assure you I am heartily glad you decided to come with me" —

"'Decided'?" echoed Jane, with slightly raised brows. "There was not much margin for choice, was there?"

"There was a moment when I feared — Of course I should not have left you, but — However, I'm thoroughly glad your good sense came out ahead of convention this time. Not just for the pleasure of having you with me; though" — Graeham paused reflectively — "I like that, too, no end. But really I've wanted very much to say something to you, and as things were I did not quite see how I could."

"Why did not you get some one to introduce you in the usual way?" asked Miss Caruth sensibly.

Graeham laughed; a quiet laugh, reminiscently amused, a trifle shamefaced. "A man hates to knock under like that! I wanted to ask you to forgive my rudeness that time, you remember?"

"Oh, don't!" cried Miss Caruth impetuously, "at

least, do; but let me apologize too. I was dreadfully rude and — and unkind to you "—

"You gave me a pretty hard knock," agreed Graeham frankly. "We 'll take turn about to apologize if you like; but it 's my first go, because "—he gave a quick laugh —"I knocked the chip off your shoulder first!"

"Off *my* shoulder! I assure you, Mr. Graeham, I had n't any chip on my shoulder!"

"Indeed you had, the worst sort."

"I did n't know it; I did n't mean to. And do you know," she went on a little shyly, "since I 've thought that I, that perhaps I" —

"No; I can't funk like that. You did n't imagine it. I really was brute enough to scowl at you. Not at *you* either, you understand, but at something, a great many things you stand for."

Miss Caruth laughed lightly. "That *I* stand for? If you knew me better you 'd know that I am one of the zeros of life, Mr. Graeham. My only significance is one of place."

"Ay," said he bluntly, "I know that sort of significance! I 'm a bad hand at splitting hairs, Miss Caruth," he broke out, with a gesture of hard earnestness, "but you have a perception, at least, unconscious perhaps, but true, of what I mean. You must have, you know; for you saw in me the antithesis of the thing I scowled at in you, and you flung it in my face when you hit back. No," —as Jane made

a faint motion of pleading, — "no; there was nothing unfair in it, and you were exactly right, as it happened, all except my tie" — he drew her attention smilingly to it with a touch. "I rather think my tie is all right!"

The wind caught the coat about Jane and tore it from her grasp, flinging it abroad, and Graeham leaned across her to secure it with a strong assured touch.

"I'm improving?" — he smiled interrogatively at her, and she nodded a bright assent. "It was not an office boy, though," he resumed presently. "I was always a good strong chap worth a dollar a day. It was a pick and shovel, Miss Caruth," he wound up quietly. "Not quite up to the office-boy mark, eh?"

Jane could not see his face, but her ear interpreted accurately enough the sore pride that spoke in his rasping tone, hastening with fierce independence to forestall the social patronage he resented. They were running into the one long street of the town before he spoke again.

"We're getting in," he remarked; then, "Had n't we better see how we stand first?"

"If you do not know," returned Miss Caruth evenly. Graeham looked quickly down, but the darkness was as baffling as the level sweetness of her tone.

"Your score wiped out mine, so we are even; except," meditatively, "that I am this hour to the good.

What I mean is, how is it to be after this?" he concluded bluntly.

"'Ever the best of friends, Pip!'" cried Jane gayly, and extricating a hand from her wraps held it out to him. Graeham did not take it, though he laid his own detainingly upon it.

"Just a moment, please. What, in your code, does friendship mean between a man of my sort and a girl of yours? You 'd expect to 'dangle' me—women call it that, don't they?—as you do Clark and Prentiss and that young ass of an Englishman who is always in your pocket—and, frankly, I don't believe I 'd dangle successfully!" He laughed brusquely. A scorching flush had risen to Miss Caruth's cheek, and she sought gently to regain her hand, but Graeham's light hold tightened.

"Don't miss my point," he said quietly, the winning note of comradeship in his tone again; "I 'm trying so hard to be fair with you. Listen. I 'm not the sort of man you know, Miss Caruth. I 'm a common sort of chap, and I don't know the rules of the game as you play it—a man don't learn your game shoveling dirt with a section gang. And you see," he leaned insistently toward her as he spoke, "you see *I* knew it all the time—all these weeks—'Mean?'" He took her up with rough earnestness, "Do you suppose I am a stick or a stone! I may not be your sort, but—I 'm a man," he finished with grave simplicity.

"Oh, don't — don't," murmured Miss Caruth, with her face turned from him, her hand gripping the door beside her, "I — what have I"—

"Just a moment," pleaded he again; "I wanted you to know why I"— his voice broke harshly, and he made no effort to finish the sentence, but took it up further along. "It was because I knew you could not know — how could you? — my sort of man." Graeham bared his broad, white hand and held it defiantly before Jane as he went on. "The scars of the pick are on it still, you see? And what they stand for has soaked into me to the bone." He laughed raspingly. "Ten years of that marks a man for life, Miss Caruth. It is the brand of the 'humble people,' and I belong to them still in many ways, though I"—

Miss Caruth did not speak; she had a sense of consternation, of shock, of breathlessness, of having mentally run against something in the dark. Graeham stepped down and offered her his hand to assist her.

"Well," he said, a little harshly, still retaining it, "is it to be friends, or" —

"Friends," said Jane, amazed that her voice served her so well.

Graeham clasped her hand closer. "Partners, eh? Pickaxe and all?"

"Pickaxe and all," said she gently.

CHAPTER VI

"It seemed too much like a fate, indeed!"

GRAEHAM left Miss Caruth at Mrs. Carlysle's door and passed on to his own rooms. A pile of mail lay upon the desk, and he seated himself before it with determined aspect, only, however, to sink back in his chair a moment after in a fit of musing, whistling an absent-minded stave as he rumpled the short locks on his forehead, with eyes that were amused, chagrined, stern, and self-accusing by turns.

Graeham's proper background was one of incident; it required movement, emotion, to show him at his best; things should be happening — he making them happen, preferably — to develop the full stature of the man. Here, dreaming over his letters, there was not a pin to choose between him and hundreds of men of his type — a type, by the way, that nature is rather fond of reproducing in this virile age. Not by any means a complex piece of mechanism, Graeham was built upon simple lines, calculated to combine the greatest potential with the least expenditure on detail; a workmanlike enough article, with a final capacity equal to a dozen such men as, say Carlysle, for instance, who required all sorts of delicate running gear to guy his natural impulses, to say nothing

of society, which acted as a fly-wheel to steady his jerks.

Women define such men as Graeham — with a line between their brows such as comes there when they speak of "a glare" — as "Impossible, you know!" But they rarely fail to marry a man of this kind if he gives them the chance, after which event they change the adjective describing him to "comfortable."

Graeham roused himself after a bit from his musing, and pushing aside his unopened mail took up a pen, his lips as he wrote falling into lines of humor oddly opposed to the concentrated gravity of his eyes. He began informally: —

DEAR JEM, — I have yours of the 18th with one inclosure. Keep a sharp lookout for others of the same sort, and forward to me here without delay. Trust no hand but yours in this, old man, and use registered mail.

The affair hangs fire unaccountably. No clue as yet. I'll stick to it for a bit, however; I'm not used to being beaten.

The devil is in it, you know! I could carry this whole town in the crown of my hat, and yet — to be baffled in this way. The thing is being uncommonly skillfully worked, and I'm about ready to agree with your theory of a man's hand being in it.

Morganton is a miniature boom town; sound

enough little job too, as far as it goes. It is backed by Eastern capital, in the hands of a ring of gentlemanly grafters with the N. Y. brand. You know their sort, — shiver on the brink six weeks before they wade in. They call it "finessing." I've dabbled a bit to give color to being here.

I don't hold with your suggestion as to the Pinkerton man. It 's caddish, to my way of thinking — putting a detective on a woman. I will work it myself.

She may be in any of these half-dozen counties along the river ; Morganton is the distributing point for all the river villages.

No go here. The women at this place are irreconcilable, quite. Eastern, correct, painfully sophisticated, and all plainly tagged and labeled — all but one girl who is visiting here. She looks like a gardenia, or those little flowers you brought home across the continent that you said you dug out of the snow "back East," you blooming old liar!

Yours truly,

CAMPBELL K. GRAEHAM.

Graeham was writing the address upon the envelope when the faint rattle of a key withdrawn from the lock met his ear.

"Come in," he said, without turning. "Go on with your tidying, if you like ; I 'm going out in a moment." And suddenly recalling a grievance, —

"Cora, don't touch my desk, like a good girl. I want to find things where I put them" —

"My name's Miss Larkin," said a voice so full of ruffled dignity and so unexpected that Graeham dropped a plash of ink upon his letter in the start he gave as he stared at the debonair figure before him. The girl held a broom and dustpan awkwardly away from the elaborate frills and open-work of a coquettish apron that adorned the trim dark gown she wore, whose well-cut lines defined the sinuous grace of her figure. Upon her hair, as heavy and lustreless as raw silk, a dainty cap rested, embellished with a big lilac bow that betrayed in every crisp turn the hand of an artist; and Mrs. Carlysle and Miss Caruth had, in fact, spent their combined efforts for several days to produce the effect at which Graeham was staring in unaffected astonishment, which changed to amusement as the girl's round chin drew upward in a pout of naïvely offended dignity immensely diverting. He noted mechanically the lines of temper in the close of her straight red mouth and the breadth of her low white forehead, which denoted, he thought, no lack of brains upon "Miss Larkin's" part.

"Oh — Miss Larkin, is it?" he said banteringly. "Well, Miss Larkin, if you are to so far honor me" —

"I don't see nothin' to laugh at," she took him up shortly.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" murmured Graeham. He gave a short laugh as he leaned back in his chair contemplating her at his leisure.

"Who fixed you up like that?" he asked, with a smile.

"Like what, I'd like to know!"

"Like a soubrette in a play."

"Er what? Miss Caruth made my cap and apron and give me th' bow."

The effect of this was intended to be crushing, but Graeham only sat up with fresh interest.

"Are you Miss Caruth's maid?"

"Maid!" she echoed, with the flash of temper that he had expected and a scandalized indignation that actually disconcerted Graeham. "Do you 'spose I'd be er woman's maid?"

"In all the story-books the princess in disguise is a lady's maid," explained he gravely. Not a touch of humor responded to his smile, however.

"I'm th' linen-closet woman," she vouchsafed him at last, with absolutely freezing dignity, "'n' I'm takin' Cora's place this *one* time" — she paused to note the effect of this upon Graeham — "to 'blige Mr. Willard."

"What's Miss Caruth making you caps for?"

"She said it was 'unthinkable' to have er apron hemmed with er machine," — she held out the hem to Graeham, who inspected it gravely, —"'n' she done it with her hands."

A slight resentment showed in her manner, and Graeham smiled.

"'Unthinkable' is a great word of Miss Caruth's; you must n't mind. She called my tie 'unthinkable,' too."

"Was you mad at her?" coming a step nearer.

"A little. Were you?"

"Awful mad. But I hate her all th' time," frankly.

"Why, you little cat!" cried Graeham, with an irrepressible laugh. "And she slaving to make you caps! Fie! Why do you hate her?" he asked more gravely. Callie dropped her broom and duster and leaned her elbows upon the desk beside Graeham.

"I dunno," she said slowly; "it jest rises up in my bosom uv itself. You know that pink dress — gown, I mean — that she wears to dances? It's short," — eagerly prompting him as he hesitated, — "'n' shows her pink slippers with high heels."

"I think I know," said Graeham.

"Well," she finished simply, "that's why."

As she leaned beside him Graeham noted the porcelain-like quality of her skin, the deep slate blue of her eyes, and his keen glance softened as she spoke.

"Feelings like those are bad for people," he said kindly, "and they 'll spoil your complexion."

He drew a couple of notes from his pocket and slipped them to her along the table.

"Buy you a little pink gown and some high-heeled slippers, and go to the next dance that comes along and forget about hating people," he counseled her cheerily. He was bored with her, but oddly sympathetic, too. Deep within some cob-webbed corner of his own mind he felt the stir of a withered leaf of memory, as dull of hue as her own confession, that had once shamed his manhood. She flicked the money carelessly back to him.

"I don't ker nothin' erbouten money; not money dry so — lessen you could have all th' other things, — clothes, 'n' — 'n' beaux, 'n' things. Air you Miss Caruth's beau?"

"I?" Graeham turned hastily to his forgotten letter and busied himself stripping off the spoiled envelope, which he cast aside.

"What would my own girl think of that?" he asked her teasingly.

"Air you 'ngaged?"

"Yes," laughed Graeham.

"What 's her name?"

"I don't know."

"Pooh! I won't never tell. Cross my heart!" and she did it then and there, to Graeham's huge amusement; but even that solemn ritual could not win his confidence.

"I don't know, honestly! She goes under an alias with me."

"You say awful funny words," murmured the girl; "wher'erbouts does she live?"

"I wish to God I knew!" exclaimed Graeham, with so involuntary a sincerity that the girl started with surprise.

"Shucks! Uv course you know."

"I 'll swear I don't."

"But 'f you 're 'ngaged to her you 'd be 'bliged to know her name!"

"Not at all! Suppose you were to write to some fellow out West, say on the other side of nowhere from here, and say there was a pretty blue-eyed little girl here, with a temper like a handful of nettles, who 'd love him if he liked, and of course he would like, would n't you be 'ngaged' to him?"

"But — but," she stammered, "he 'd be *'bliged* to write his name to th' letter!"

Her breath died in her throat, her heart was beating in stifling jerks, but she achieved the sentence. Graeham was rewriting the address upon the letter and did not answer for a moment.

"Not much he would!" he laughed down on her as he rose. "He might think his own name was not fine enough to go 'courtin'' with, and borrow one for the occasion. Here, take your money — take it, I say!" He opened her hand and closed it upon the notes, and was gone.

As the door closed behind him the girl sank into his chair in a trance of amazement; a slight, inward

trembling seized her at intervals, her brain swam with the daze of ideas that crowded upon her. What did he mean? Did he know? Was it, could it be possible? Breath failed her.

Stories of Graeham's wealth, the success of his business ventures at Morganton, his careless munificence in the little town, had filtered through successive strata of hotel society until they had reached the little linen woman in her secluded niche; and unable to resist the desire to see the man of whom she had heard so much, she had effected a trade with Cora, whereby certain personal belongings had been transferred to that astute damsel, in return for the use and privileges of her pass-key, with a result almost as startling as though Cora's key had unlocked Bluebeard's chamber of horrors.

Callie's nature, by one of heredity's grim jests, was a psychological amalgam of hard shrewdness combined with a temperament as light as froth, shot through by the instinctive refinements, the luxurious tastes, and the headlong passions of a long line of spoiled and imperious women; and, brought into contact with her natural environment, the girl had sloughed off her outer integument of crudeness and coarseness, and had absorbed greedily from the atmosphere about her the natural aliment for her hitherto unknown self.

The mental stimulus of her new life had quickened every faculty, and she had seized with instant com-

prehension upon the core of possibility underlying Graeham's jesting words, arriving at a partial solution of the situation by a feat of mental gymnastics that scorned deduction. Her tense attitude relaxed, and her eyes, roving idly about the desk, fell upon the discarded envelope; she gathered it up mechanically to tidy it away, and paused again, arrested by the name upon it. Once and again tracing the letters with her finger, she spelled out the name, unconsciously helped by her familiarity with Goodloe's writing in the letters which she had so often spelled out in the same way: "Mr. James H. Goodloe, U. & G. Rolling Stock Mills, Redfalls, Nevada."

She gazed with parted lips upon the scrap of paper as her thoughts, like a revolving whirl of water, spun dizzily about the central fact of Graeham's indubitable connection with Goodloe. But how? — which was Goodloe? which Graeham? One man with two names, — her whirling brain could scarce hold the fact a second, — or two men with interchangeable names? She strove to untangle the coil of personality, constantly confused and swerved aside from even such reasoning as she was capable of by the captivating hope, the new delicious dream, that the man who had just left her might be the unknown, half-feared fate toward which she was drifting. She wrung her hands together in an ecstacy of hope. Then, suddenly as if a shutter had

snapped open in her brain, the hard practical side of her nature slipped uppermost. She sprang up, and passing into Graeham's bedroom beyond, as softly as a breeze might move among a bed of flowers went through his belongings. His keys! Where did he keep them? The lock of dressing-case and letter-case were both fast. She did not waste herself in useless effort; there would be other times. And gathering up the torn scrap of paper, she hid it in her dress, and softly went her way.

Meanwhile, in Mrs. Carlysle's sitting-room some dozen yards away, a perturbed and somewhat puzzled trio of self-elected fates sat in council about the hearth. Carlysle from his place upon the rug contemplated his two confederates with amusement that was dashed broadly with gravity; the amusement directed to the faces of his companions, the gravity to the letter in his hand. From Mrs. Carlysle's hand dangled a string of beautiful pearls, and Miss Caruth, still in her habit, held an open ring-box in her hand and balanced meditatively upon her palm two rings, a lady's and a gentleman's engagement ring, heavy bands of plain gold set round with diamonds.

"Let Goodloe alone," Carlysle urged energetically. "Why cannot the man do what he likes with his money? I'll lay anything you like he has not got the fun out of anything since he left off

red-topped boots that he 's getting out of sending Jane " —

" *Jane!* "

Miss Caruth turned eyes of grave reproof upon him, and his wife rose, and, with the aspect of one forced against her will to assume responsibility for what she has all along disapproved of, crossed the floor with a protesting murmur of silk and rang the bell, and sent a message for Miss Larkin. Neither took any further notice of Carlysle. He laughed sardonically.

" If ever I am fool enough again to go partners with two girls! — Why, of course it 's *Jane* this fellow is in love with. What does he know about this little simpleton here, forty fathoms deep in a flirtation with Willard? "

" I told you, Jane," remarked Mrs. Carlysle, with the serenity born of absolute conviction, " that Callie Larkin was a double little piece."

" Well, I don't know that," deliberated Carlysle, with the air of mentally turning Callie this way and that to get a better light upon her. " She 's playing her own little game in her own way, but so long as she steers clear of trouble " —

" But suppose she throws this man over? "

" Well, suppose she does? Not that she has the slightest idea of it; throwing people over is not Callie's *métier*."

" It would be dishonorable, cruel! And it would

reflect more upon us than upon her. Callie is an ignorant, undisciplined girl; we"— Miss Caruth sat erect, her eyes full of tender sternness, a spot of rose beginning to glow upon her delicate cheek. "I," she resumed, "*I* drew this man into this thing, this entanglement, and in honor" —

"He 'll be glad to be free of it, I dare say."

"He is very much in love with her," said Miss Caruth quietly. "Read his letter for yourself!"

"With whom?" retorted Carlysle bluntly,—"the writer of these letters!"

A soft knock was followed by Callie's entrance. Her cheeks were a vivid carnation, and her lips curled upward at the corners in the Puck-like smile she wore in moments that in any other than Callie would be called moments of mental tension. The tension was evident enough upon the little group within; the air smelt of fate, and each was uncomfortably aware of having for the time being slipped out of his ordinary groove and as uncomfortably aware of making an effort to appear that he had not.

"Sit here by me, Callie," said Miss Caruth kindly. "There is a letter from Mr. Goodloe, and he has sent you something to make you think of him. You will like that, will you not?"

She took the pearls from Mrs. Carlysle and clasped them about Callie's throat, the girl submitting herself with passive indifference to her hand.

Callie had an odd gift of flatting situations to

whose heights she could not or would not rise. It was not the tactful carrying of them off that comes with social training, and not always then, nor the high-handed abridgment of them that is the attribute of certain drawing-room Napoleons; Callie simply ignored the tragic wherever she encountered it, repudiated the inexplicable, and there was that in her calm oblivion to all not entirely obvious that carried others with her spite of their superior training.

"I 've got er string uv beads," she said easily, and twirled the pearls upon her finger, "prettier 'n these; mine air pink."

Carlysle broke into a peal of laughter; her cool *insouciance* delighted him always.

"Beads!" gasped Mrs. Carlysle. "Those exquisite pearls!"

"The letter has no regular beginning," said Carlysle, preparing to read.

"Not no beginnin'?" gasped Callie, turning startled eyes on Jane; "I jes' know he's mad at me!"

"'No letter this week, Mary?' read Carlysle. 'Don't you know that your letter day is my Sunday? I keep it holy, and read the letter bit by bit to make it last the longer'" —

("Ain't he er goose?" interpolated Callie, in Jane's ear.

"He 's lovely!" indignantly responded Miss Caruth. "Be still!")—"'and then I wear it in my pocket until the next one comes to relieve guard.'"

("Did you ever hear such nonsense, Kate?" asked Carlysle, with a long look into his wife's eyes.

"Yes; once before!")

"'But seriously I have been anxious. Of course, under any other circumstances I should have wired at once, but I have had my lady's orders.'"

("Why in thunder did n't you write, Jane?" growled Carlysle.

"I forgot to," pleaded Jane. "But who would have dreamed that he would care so much?")

"'Of course you would have some one write me if you were ill, would you not? By the way, am I always to be "Mr. Goodloe"? and you always "sincerely" mine? No more than sincerely? That 's good enough, of course; but you know, dear, a man 's a man, and sincerely does leave a good deal to the imagination.'"

Carlysle stole a glance over the letter at Jane's face, — it was soft with dreams, her eyes listening to a voice in her heart, which said the words there, — and passed on in troubled question to the other girl's face. She, too, was brooding upon Miss Caruth's dreaming face with eyes as hard as agates, the light of dreams upon Jane's face seeming to spread a shadow upon her own.

"'I don't quite fancy the idea that you forgot me last week or were larking with some other fellow, so I 've settled down on the theory that you are ill, and I 'm sending you something to cheer you up.

The middle bead — I guess they are beads — has a kiss upon it.'"

"Kiss it, Callie!" commanded Carlysle. "If I 'm to superintend this affair, I mean to see that it is well done. The party of the second part shall not be defrauded of his just rights."

"I 'm s'prised at you, Mr. Carlysle," said Callie demurely. "I ain't got no use fur foolishness."

"'Foolishness!' Hear her, O Cupid! Into the breach, Janet!" And, echoing his laugh, Jane threw herself with gay ardor upon the other girl's breast and kissed the big pearl with enthusiasm.

"It 's a shame," she cried, between laughter and blushes, "for his kiss to be wasted! Callie, you 're a cold little puss! You don't deserve a good fellow like Jem Goodloe!"

"I never could do play-actin' befo' folkses," remarked Callie, looking a little bored. "Ain't they no more to the letter?"

"Rather the most important part, I should say. By the way, he signs himself, 'Yours for time and eternity.' Willard will enjoy that."

"Shucks," said Callie imperturbably.

Carlysle resumed the letter. "'Upon thinking it over, I have put two rings into the box, one for each of us. Think it over upon your side, Mary, and if you are sure of yourself and sure of me, wear one and send me back the other. Take all the time you need to decide; think well of it, and do not act unless you

mean it, as I do, to bind us both for time and eternity. Faithfully yours, JAMES H. GOODLOE.'"

Carlysle took the rings, and with a certain ceremony as of one resigning a delegated authority into the hands responsible for it, handed them to Callie and stepped back to his place upon the rug, leaving her alone with her decision. She took the smaller ring and slipped it carelessly on, looked at it thoughtfully, and removed it.

"I can't wear it 'thout ever'body knowing," she said carelessly. "You keep it for me, Miss Jane, 'n' th' beads too, in your gold box," — she glanced stealthily at the clock and rose to go.

"Am I to send this other ring to Goodloe?" asked Carlysle, detaining her. "Do you understand?"

"A—w, yes," easily, "I 'm 'ngaged to him."

"And Willard? That must stop now, you know."

"I 'm s'prised at you, Mr. Carlysle," said she, with calm reproof. "I don't never see Mr. Willard — 'cept on business."

"Where *in* the world do you suppose this girl really came from, Jim?" asked Mrs. Carlysle, as they strolled back to their room to dress for dinner, "and where is she going now in such a hurry?"

"'She-car-go,'" drawled Carlysle, "as to the first; somewhere to meet Willard as fast as her feet can carry her, as to the second."

"I'd hate to have anything happen here," hesitated she.

"Nothing will; she could not have a better sheep-dog than Willard. Don't worry."

"Oh — worry! You have n't any idea that she came from Chicago, surely!"

"She might have, of course, though I think she is a Southern girl. The way I explain her" — they both laughed — "well, my theory fits as well as any other. She belongs to some old family here in the South, — broken-down aristocracy, you know, run to seed. The grace, the charm, the seductiveness, are immutable; can't peter out — and she has them all. And for the rest, my Kate, she 's what heredity plus environment has made her. Fancy, if you please, what two hundred years of Southern 'plantation' life would work out. Don't tease her about her little secret, dear. After all, what does it matter to us? If one finds a broken-winged bird on the ground, one puts it back in the nest and does not bother about its nomenclature. Kate," — he resumed the talk from his dressing-room, — "does she ever speak of that little beggar we shunted off to the Sisters at Orrville?"

"Never."

"Does she ever think of him?"

"How should I know, dear?"

"I can't think we treated the little devil fairly."

"You advised it, Jim."

"Oh — advised! It was a case of the survival of the fittest. But if the baby were the wise child we really have no right to expect him to be, I 'd advise him fast enough to get himself tucked up in a snug little green grave, and inaugurate the Company's new graveyard out there on the hill.— Do my tie for me, Kate! — Is n't Janet in love with Graeham? Come now, is n't she?"

"Mr. Graeham! Why," with loyal vagueness, "she scarcely knows" —

"Don't try that on with me, Kate! Is n't she?"

"Mr. Graeham," temporized Kate, "is a very delightful man, *I* think; though he *is* a little — that is, one can see that he has not been accustomed to" —

"I could n't," — stoutly; — "Graeham is a very good sort, with a head a mile long." A busy silence for five minutes; then, "Kate! I 'm going to give you a tip, and I want you to put Jane on. Men have a confounded way, you know, dear, of translating women's relations to other men by the key of some other woman's relation to them. Catch on?"

"You 're a little Ibsenish; but yes, I think I know what you mean. I 've told you before why they do it, but you can't understand. It 's because men never *can* completely disentangle the individual from the sex."

"Graeham has come some rather nasty croppers in the past with women; he would, you know, — he 's

that sort. He gave me a skit of those early experiences of his, that was rather awful. When he'd just made his money, you know, he 'saw life' for a couple of years — God knows where! Wherever it is served up in great, raw chunks" —

"Heavens, Jim!"

"Well, it was rank. And you see the light of that appalling past of his will be worse for a woman than that some sort of light that beats upon something or other and blackens every blot. Of course Jane has n't any blots, but that 's what it would do right along, — blacken 'em if she had. What? Why, Kate, you 're the blindest little dormouse! Graeham 's the hardest hit man I 've seen since you bowled me over!"

CHAPTER VII

"That step he did not take, he knew not why, nor we; but only God."

LIFE at Morganton was put up in a rather highly concentrated form; the very atmosphere seeming to be charged with a quality of unexpectedness that, taken as a regular diet, was apt to react upon the nerves. Thus, when Peter Clark opened his door at seven o'clock in the morning after his arrival, in answer to an imperative rap, and confronted Carlysle, with his hand impatiently upon the knob and his face tense with repressed excitement, that usually equable and always well-mannered young gentleman's brows came together with a slam.

"What the deuce has happened *now?*" he demanded, in a tone that matched Carlysle's expression. Carlysle wasted no amenities upon the occasion.

"Isom Jourdan is dead," he returned, with nervous brevity.

"And out of our way," supplemented Clark, in a tone of profound congratulation. "We 'll put it through at once."

"Not he!"—grimly;—"he 's simply changed his base of operations to h—. Read that!"

He flung a paper upon the table, but went on restlessly before Clark could read it: —

"It's an abstract of his will. Did you know he had a daughter, Peter?"

"Yes." Clark had returned to his toilet. "Is she the legatee?" The razor jigged in his hand, and he laid it aside, and wiping the lather from his cheek, flung himself into a chair.

"In a way she is — the most infernal way! It appears that this girl, old Jourdan's daughter, is not just what she" —

"I know; get on."

"The land, barring ten acres reserved with the falls, goes to Carter Cartright, old Jourdan's nephew; the ten acres, with the water and all rights, goes to the girl, with a string to it. Deathbed reparation act, it seems," —

"Get on with it," demanded Clark.

"On the condition," went on Carlysle impressively, while Clark rose, and with his hand in his trousers' pocket walked to the window, — "on the condition that she marries the father of her child within twelve months."

"Child?" cried Clark, with a slight catch in his breath, — "child!"

"Yes; I told you that she was not what she should be."

"This is the first time I have ever heard that being a mother is what a woman should not be,"

retorted the young man, in a voice of smothered bitterness, still with his face to the open window.

Carlysle flung the retort from him with a gesture of restless indifference.

"What it comes to, Peter, is that Isom Jourdan has offered to bribe some cur to marry his daughter, by putting the right to this water in his hands. 'Making an honest woman of her,' I suppose he called it. Jove! But let that go. The first thing is to lay our hands on the man and get this concession from him."

"Upon her, I suppose you mean? This girl disappeared from Pike County months ago, and has never been heard from since."

"A—h," said Carlysle slowly; and sank into a momentary reverie, from which he roused himself presently to ask carelessly, — "I forget, Peter, if you said you saw this girl when you were in Alabama that time."

"Yes, I think I saw her. A little country cracker, with scarlet hair and freckles."

Carlysle's alert attitude relaxed into disgusted repose, as he remarked inappositely, — "Graeham is looking into this deal, too. Wants to swing it alone, I understand."

"Is that brute still here?"

"Ah, you 've been away. Six months, is n't it?"

"Barring that week last fall. Miss Caruth 's the magnet, I suppose?"

"What color did you say her eyes were, Clark? — Iola Jourdan's, I mean?"

"Exactly the color of the midnight sky," returned Clark, after a reluctant pause. Carlysle stared meditatively at him.

"Dark night or fair?"

"Fair," — he spoke as though the words were being wrung from him under pressure, — "but no moon; the way it looks when you're alone with the night — and one other."

"Holy smoke!" Carlysle reached the other's side with a stride.

"Look out, Carlysle! I'm shaving, man."

"You're a poet, Peter! By Jove, I'd no idea it was in you. You've got that about her eyes down pretty fine, eh?"

"Get out," mumbled Clark, behind his poised razor, and Carlysle obeyed without further parley.

Certain natures seem fitted with special organs to attract and assimilate the infinitesimal filaments cast off from personality: the impalpable dust of character that floats, invisible to the normal vision, in the atmosphere of social life; a fleeting glance from unconscious eyes; a half tone too much or too little; a musing smile behind a friend's back momentarily turned; the passage of a troubled thought across a brow; a neglected meal; a step that lags, or one that goes more blithely than its wont to meet

another — this is the aliment from which such natures as Callie Larkin's secrete suspicion, which in time will generate energy and direct action. Callie had shaped no course of action. Action in women of her type nearly always results from some such untraceable process of unconscious cerebration as had been set in motion by the torn envelope upon Graeham's floor.

But she knew what she wanted, and she went toward it guided by an instinct as unerring as that of the sea-anemone, when it separates its food by unconscious selection from the ocean currents about it.

In the stress of her uncertainty she had bethought her of Willard, mainly because she was secure of her power over him, that would enable her to withhold her confidence, even while she coaxed an explanation of certain practical difficulties that confronted her, as she followed the impalpable thread of her intuition through the no-thoroughfares of feminine reason to her conclusion.

She ignored the formality of a knock and entered Willard's office, which was divided from the foyer only by a lattice and curtain, with soft assurance, amply justified by the magic with which the young manager's impatient frown smoothed itself at sight of his visitor. Mindful of the quick ears upon the other side of the lattice, Willard did not speak; but, curving his arm, held it out in silent invitation to her. Callie ignored the invitation and intrenched

herself behind the desk, meeting Willard's eyes from under her lowered lashes with a teasing smile.

"You 're a mean girl," said Willard; "see if I don't pay you out."

"I ain't skeer uv you," she informed him serenely.

"You 'd better be," retorted Willard, with a grin of adoration. "I 'm your boss, I 'll give you to understand."

"Pooh!" said she; and, leaning forward, powdered his face daintily with a carnation for a powder puff.

"What do you want?" inquired he, distinctly softened by this attention. "I know you too well, you little fraud, to think I 'm getting all this for nothing."

"I wanter ax you somethin'."

"This is not my day for giving away valuable information — for nothing."

"Supposin' you wait ontel you air axed to give it away fur nothin'," she retorted, with drawling impertinence, calmly watching, as a surgeon might watch the effect of an anæsthetic, its effect upon Willard, whose shrewd, rather hard face brooded upon her as a mother's might almost, with tender toleration.

He held up two fingers with mischievous significance and determined aspect; Callie shook her head, and in turn held up one of her own with a thumb laid against it, reducing it to a fraction. Willard

returned to his papers with an air of having closed negotiations.

"Hello, Clark," said Graeham's voice, in the lobby at their backs; "how is it East?"

Two steps approached each other, there was a sound vaguely indicative of hands shaken, then Clark's voice.

"Rotten. No better here. Snow in this climate is an absurdity."

"Mud, you mean," amended Graeham. The sputter of a match filled in the pause.

"I hear you are in for the Chinquepin option?" said Clark.

"It looks that way. Of course, no one can do anything until the heir shows up. Where the deuce can this Iola Jourdan have got herself?"

"Who air they talkin' erbout?" whispered Callie, in Willard's ear.

"Oh, — just a country girl down the river. Her father 's died and left her a chunk of stuff, and she has n't showed up to get it; that 's all."

She gazed at him with slowly dilating eyes and lips apart.

"Tell me th' rest," her lips formed dumbly. Willard looked a trifle uncomfortable.

"It is n't exactly money, you know; he left her some land with a waterfall on it, and those fellows," he motioned backward to the lobby, "a whole bunch of fellows here, want to get it from her; that 's all."

"Of course, it 's touch and go, with a condition like that," — a blunt laugh which Clark joined languidly. "Women *are* kittle-cattle! But old Jourdan plainly knew his man. He has offered him a thumping bribe to marry the girl. Oh, — no doubt; a gentleman, or a skunk, or he would n't have fixed it that way."

"What does he mean by that?" whispered the girl inside. Willard flushed.

"It 's too long to explain. Well, she, — this Iola Jourdan — why, the fact is, she is not the sort of woman for you to know about."

"Go on!" — she shook him impatiently. Willard smiled teasingly and held up his two fingers again; this time she nodded impatiently, and he whispered the story as it was known about the hotel, the girl's face growing sharp in the intensity of her interest.

"Oh, — of course, voluntary," went on Graeham, in the lobby; "but it is hardly conceivable that she will refuse under the circumstances, — unless she wanted to even up with him. What a revenge it would be! To keep a man out of a good thing like this to pay him out, you know. True; but she might not care for the money. I can imagine a woman doing a thing like that, can't you?"

"You should write a play, Graeham," said Clark coldly. "Such a situation should not be wasted."

On the other side of the curtain, Willard was demanding payment for his story. Callie offered him

the finger she had held up to kiss. Willard declined to compromise, with scorn; showed a determination to enforce his contract.

"I'm s'prised at you, Mr. Willard," she reproved him demurely. "You do act so strange sometimes."

But she came within easy reach of his arm, and took down a key from the long line that hung above his desk. Willard's face clouded with denial.

"No; I've told you a dozen times you cannot have a pass-key."

Callie put the key into her pocket. "I'm in earnest," said Willard. "Give it here!"

She held up one rosy finger. "No," said he firmly. "It's against the rules."

Callie added another finger, and Willard wavered; she leaned coaxingly upon his chair.

"I'm doing it for your sake, to keep you out of trouble," he told her gently. She leaned nearer to him, turned his face toward her with a finger under his chin, and Willard succumbed. She carried off the key.

"You might as well sign the pay-roll while you are here," he called after her, with unsuccessful sternness, intended to cover his recent yielding. Callie came back with alacrity. Signing the pay-roll was a great occasion, which Willard seemed also to enjoy. Various preliminaries, not usually considered necessary to that simple piece of business, were gone through. First, Callie took off her cuff and turned

up her sleeve, and, having accepted a portion of Willard's chair, grasped the pen firmly, bunching all her fingers about its tip, while Willard looked on with a smile. But his part of the programme being reached here, he proceeded to enclose both hand and pen in his own fist, and the signature at last got under way; the girl's cap against Willard's wholesome cheek, her lip bitten in the excitement of the strokes.

"That 's not the way to start off," he admonished her, as she faintly resisted his effort to begin. "Are n't you ever going to learn to make a capital C? It slews round like this — so. You always try to beat me into making an I."

The snowstorm was still raging with picturesque fury when Miss Caruth emerged into the empty streets for her walk. Great sheets of snow were whirled upon a wind as soft and buoyant as April's, with an effect distinctly spectacular, the snow seeming to be painted upon the dun sky, and somewhat overdone in point of vehemence.

The cold, fragrant air was intensely exhilarating; and as Miss Caruth made her way along the dripping streets to the post office, she had a joyous sense of companionship with the blustering freshness of the day, of being arm in arm with the roistering young wind, making an afternoon of it. She sent a glance back from shelter of the post-office door, full of gay promise of a later meeting in the fields

beyond, almost hidden beneath the swarms of white bees whirling there. As her hand touched the door the spring slackened, as some one grasped it from within, and Graeham's tall figure filled the opening. He glanced quickly past Miss Caruth to the empty street.

"Who was that glance for?" he asked bluntly, as he lifted his hat. Out of the semi-gloom within the building, the girl's face shone upon him, delicately fair and vital, between the richness of her furs and the indefinite softness of her dark hat, like the purely tinted, hardy blossoms that dare the buffeting of the early spring gales. She was so intensely alive, so slenderly, buoyantly strong, that Graeham recalled his first impression of her, as a delicate steel coil with a current through it.

"A friend," she explained suavely, in reply to Graeham's question; "such a dear, jolly fellow!"

Graeham's stolid face altered by a shade, and his glance along the empty street steadied into keenness, just tinged with jealous gloom. He half raised his hat as though to leave her, hesitated, glanced without again, as if debating the other man's possible defection, and finally turned back at her side.

"Hold these, please," commanded Miss Caruth, handing him one by one the contents of her muff, which she was dislodging in her search for the letter she had come to post. A long, limp purse, made

of silver scales, that slipped through Graeham's hands like a water-serpent, was followed by a small, much inflated package, that he wonderingly decided must contain compressed air; a pair of long crumpled kid gloves, that felt like rose-leaves and were delicately redolent of violets, came next, and at last the letter.

Graeham had followed the progress of the search with amused eyes, and he glanced carelessly at the letter she held aloft in triumph. It was too dark to decipher the writing, but the mere externals of the letter gave it a personality so distinct as to cause him an odd shock. The size and shape of the pale gray envelope, crossed by three lines of level writing, the double stamp, the faint odor of violets that exhaled from it, were thrillingly familiar. Each detail had been studied over and over, and each had contributed its intangible item toward the image of the woman who had written the ones at that moment locked in his letter-case a block away.

In the stress of his amazement, Graeham walked mechanically at Miss Caruth's side from the building. A turmoil of thoughts was rushing through his mind, from which he gained but two clear impressions,—an incredulous, excited joy, breathless and tumultuous, and a doubt that his will kept resolutely at bay.

They were well out into the snowy fields before he had succeeded in wrenching his mind from its

preoccupation. He stopped in the middle of the snowy road, and stood looking down into Jane's eyes with whimsical directness.

"Where 's that fellow you told to wait?"

Miss Caruth gave a soft, rallying laugh. "I was rather wondering, myself. Do you know, Mr. Graeham, your subliminal self is a very rude person? He deserted me at the post-office door, without so much as a tip of the hat. Does your astral wear a hat?"

"Brute!" commented Graeham, still a bit lost and shaken; "I 'll kick him when he gets back."

"Oh, he 's back! He got back a bit ago. Where had he wandered off to?"

"Perhaps in search of *your* subliminal self," said he, with a long grave look into her eyes, that gave Miss Caruth pause, mentally, but she covered it with a laughing glance of approval.

"That does fairly well! I shall have to forgive him, after all. But I was a little vexed with him, because the other poor fellow — the every-day self he left behind —was *so* troubled about something. I wanted dreadfully to straighten things out for him."

Jane was a little breathless and shy at the end of her sentence, much to her own surprise, and a tinge of color showed in Graeham's cheek as he looked down into the eyes she disdained to lower.

"That 's awfully good of you. He was a bit lost

—he's rather a dull chap, you know. Would you really help him to find himself if he should lose out?"

"Yes."

"Even if you knew it was his own cock-sure folly that had lost him the way to—happiness?"

"All the more."

They walked on without speaking, pausing sometimes while Graeham brought her a seed-pod from the roadside, whose fairy whorl was delicately powdered with diamond dust, or a plume of grasses bearded with snow. Once, as he rejoined Jane, Graeham's eyes were caught by their two footprints side by side in the snowy road, Jane's slim tracks beside his own deeply trodden ones; and the sight had waked a rebellious throb in the man—a hungry yearning, that shook to its foundation the bulwark he had been spending himself for weeks to erect between them.

"Are we heading for the river?" he asked, as they breasted a slight rise in the road.

"Yes; I want to see how it looks to-day. When the fields are green, it is blue; and when they are brown, it is gray; and now, all veiled in white"—

"It is green," announced Graeham, his height enabling him to see beyond the rise that hid the river from Miss Caruth. She turned her eyes with veiled reproach upon him, and an absurd tremor of remorseful pain shot through Graeham, even while he

struggled perplexedly to divine its cause, half suspecting a trap, that the delicious suggestion in her glance might melt into a delicately mocking smile and a speculative glance, which said, "How *could* you think I meant it!"

"*I* should n't have looked if *you* could n't see," she vouchsafed him at last in a murmur, her eyes turned away from him, skimming the white fields, and her chin a trifle elevated. A reflection of inward humor was in the smile that bent Graeham's lips.

"By George!" he confided to himself; "if I have n't come to a pretty pass, to be yanked about by a girl like this."

Miss Caruth appealed, as no other woman had ever appealed, to both sides of Graeham at once; and he was conscious, as he looked down upon her, of an almost poignant delight in her. She appealed to the original man, with a few vital elements of character, strong and simple; whose ideal was the fiercely fastidious, "pure as snow, chaste as ice" conception, before which men of his intensely virile type invariably prostrate themselves mentally, no matter how frankly they may hunger with the rest of them for the satisfying warmth of the woman who is flesh of their flesh and bone of their bone. But she made a yet more powerful appeal to the "made" side of him, with its more complex needs, developed by his contact with the world in his later years. Her

manner to him, frank, and coolly unattached, flattered and chafed him by turns; her exquisite reserves, that he could not interpret, baffled him and drew him on; he found her reticences, whose meanings he could only guess, more piquantly provocative than any imagined witchery of another woman; her mind, reflecting in every turn a life perfectly foreign to his own, stimulated his more slowly moving mental machinery; and her brilliant impersonal polish, which held him off, even in the moments when he could discern a bewildering response to him beneath it, piqued him, and made him feel like a lad again, hot and raw and restive. The consciousness, too, that Miss Caruth regarded him as an episode in her life, rather than a force that might dominate it, roused his combativeness, and supplied the last element of fascination in Graeham's conquest.

With the keenness of perception that had made so largely for his success in business, he realized that the exquisite quality of her charm for him lay in its evanescence. Here, in lovely concrete form, was the thing he had followed all his man's life, as a man might track an unknown flower by its perfume; and the lack of which in women had, time and time again, thrown him back upon himself in flat disillusionment and fastidious distaste. Oddly enough, the elusiveness of the charm was the rivet that fastened his chains upon Graeham — the same half-seen,

half-dreamed, and wholly fleeting thing that had so charmed him in Mary Meadows's letters, and had sent him upon his headlong quest in search of her.

"I only caught a glimpse," he replied finally, to Miss Caruth's challenge; "but I see now it was a bit selfish. Forgive me, won't you? You see"— his tone made a whimsical appeal for sympathy — "when a fellow has to stumble along, with no one to give him a tip"—

"And all in the dark, too," supplemented Jane gravely; "for you remember the game is not worth the candle!"

Graeham pondered this retort in silence. He had a man-like sense of the validity of the last contract, and he had supposed that the agreement he and Miss Caruth had reached upon that first ride together had invalidated his previous confidences; and this doubling back upon her part to a position from which he had voluntarily receded, rather lost Graeham his feet.

"But I thought we were friends, world without end, for time and eternity?"

Miss Caruth met his earnest frown serenely. "So we are!"

Graeham gave it up. "You can see the river from the fence," said he, humbly retracing his steps to the tangible offense for which he could make amends; "and it is very wet nearer the bank."

He shifted the rails into a rude seat as he spoke,

and, brushing them clear of snow, turned back to assist her. Miss Caruth extended her hand absently, her eyes busied meanwhile in selecting a comfortably jutting rail to ascend by. Graeham ignored her hand, and before she could divine his intention had lifted her, quite as a matter of course, in his arms, and seated her easily in the crotch of the fence. Silence followed Miss Caruth's involuntary gasp of dismay, a silence that grew more strained with every heart-beat that lengthened it.

From her elevated seat Jane could see the river, a streak of dull jade between the white fields; and with her muff interposed between her face and Graeham, who leaned in miserable silence beside her, she gazed steadily at it. Graeham broke the silence resolutely, and a trifle stiffly, at last.

"I told you, Miss Caruth, what a wretched dolt I am about women. It comes so naturally to a man," he went on in troubled argument, "to do these little things for a woman."

Miss Caruth turned further from him, with a gesture of restrained coldness. She had a confused sense of having heard the words somewhere before, a bewildering consciousness of being on Graeham's side, in spite of her anger.

"I am sure you meant only to be kind, Mr. Graeham," she said evenly. Graeham brushed aside her concession with an impatient earnestness, that gave it a slightly tinny sound, even to her own ears.

"Tell me, will you not, why you were so vexed by a perfectly natural act upon my part?"

"Oh," cried Miss Caruth, "why are you so — difficult? Surely you know — you must know, that what you did was grossest rudeness!" Graeham stared moodily at the river, a flush mounting to his forehead.

"I did not know," he said at last simply, and after a moment of struggle; "I warned you that I did not know the rules of the game as you play it. I suppose," he added, more to himself than to her, "I suppose I 'd best chuck it up."

"I thought we were friends, 'world without end?'" suggested she smoothly, her face still turned from him; but the barrier of the big muff lowered, so that had Graeham looked he could have seen the curve of her cheek and a slight tremor of Jane's delicate, wide lips. But Graeham did not look; he said stiffly instead, —

"That is with you, Miss Caruth."

"Then — will you listen to me a moment, Mr. Graeham, as if I were a man friend, you know, giving you a tip about — oh, about something that he knew all about, and you knew very little?" Graeham turned back, and, leaning his arm upon the rails, faced her in attentive silence. "In society, you know, Mr. Graeham, — we 'll call it my game, if you like, — in society, people do not do things because they are natural; no one dreams of being

natural, ever! They could n't be; it would not be tolerated; naturalness is social outlawry. No! you would not! Society is one game whose rules no one questions, — or questions successfully; one obeys them, you know, whether they like it or no; obedience is one's *raison d' être*, socially. You do not even exist — you are not born — until you know its ritual, and are prepared to do it reverence. So you see?" Jane wound up, with lucid eloquence.

"I see!" said he, with a quick smile of pleasure in the girl who lectured him with sweet didacticism, but whose eyes under wavering lashes could not meet his own, though his eyes shone with satirical humor. "What rot," he went on bluntly, "to corral men and women behind a lot of nasty little rules — like broken bottles on top of a wall — when there 's all of life outside to live! Should n't you like it better outside?"

"I don't know; I 've always been inside."

"But if a fellow were lucky enough to be already on the outside, he 'd better stop there, should n't you think?"

"Unless there was something on the inside that — that he wanted very much," replied Miss Caruth, from the shelter of the muff.

Silence again; the snow had settled in drifts upon Graeham's shoulders and powdered Miss Caruth's furs.

"How does one get inside?" asked Graeham, the

words coming in a rush, as if crowded in between two heart-beats.

"The tame ones, already inside, show them the way." They were both smiling.

"Will you show me?"

"Yes. The first thing is to dress for dinner! A dinner coat creates the correct atmosphere; it modifies the individual aura; it is the outward and visible sign of the grace of artificiality, that one must acquire."

"I 've been made game of before, thank you," interrupted Graeham coolly. "I 'm pretty well up, so you need not bother."

"That 's not bad," returned Jane critically; "the tone was particularly good. Oh, there 's one thing, before I forget it. With women, you know — ignore them more; the best manner for a man, at least a very effective manner, is to hardly ever look at a woman, or listen to anything she says."

"Jove!" pondered Graeham, in profound amazement. "That 's a new tip! No wonder I 've always lost out. What is next?"

"Home!" cried Jane gayly, and not waiting for his aid, sprang down and turned homeward.

CHAPTER VIII

"But who could have expected this when we two drew together first,
Just for the obvious human bliss, to satisfy life's daily thirst with a thing men seldom miss?"

"WHAT nonsense poets and socialists and people of that sort talk, about uplifting the race and er — things of that sort," murmured Mrs. Carlysle reflectively, at dinner a few nights later, "when every one knows perfectly that the only thing that ever really elevates a man is dress clothes!" She looked pensively at Graeham's stalwart figure, immaculately transfigured. "See how softened, chastened, elevated, Mr. Graeham is in a dinner coat."

"Graeham always looks 'chastened' when he 's getting ready to smash up somebody's deal," advanced Carlysle, a little moodily, though he nodded cheerfully to Graeham, who nodded back. He seemed preoccupied and, as Miss Caruth thought, stealing a glance at him, stern. He did not look their way again, and in the middle of dinner rose and, still wearing his air of stern abstraction, left the room.

"That reminds me, girls," said Carlysle, touching earth after a mental parabola; "Graeham will drop

in to-night, and Clark is bringing Colonel De Resett up. We are all the best of friends, you know? This Chinquepin matter is entirely outside of personal relations, eh?"

"Of course, dear; but I do think" —

Carlysle found his wife's hand, under the table, and folded it in his own.

"Naturally! But I must confess, it is not so plain to me how Jane is going to divide up. You 'll have to do some clever hedging between our company and Graeham's."

Miss Caruth declined to commit herself beyond a smile, that flouted daintily his suggestion of hedging.

But, spite of his politic hint, it was plain to Carlysle, when he entered his wife's reception room later in the evening, that a division had been called, and two hostile camps, Clark's and Graeham's, already established. A half-dozen women were present, and the usual relays of men dropping in through the evening.

The rival companies, Chinquepin and old Jourdan's missing heir, held the stage, to the exclusion of every other subject. Surmise, conjecture, and prophesies, friendly tips and hostile warnings, jostled each other as they flew from lip to lip; the women discussing the organization of the companies, with a mastery of technique and an amazing fluency of detail, that amused the men present, no less than

their sudden elisions and hasty improvisations when the talk veered round to the unvarnished conditions of the old man's will.

Graeham had entered the field as a free lance against the Development Company, and what that Company chose to call its "prior claim." And as each day narrowed the circle of possibilities, — for sooner or later the girl must be located, — the competition between Graeham and the Development Company grew keener, and the efforts of each more strenuous to solve the silence of the girl at whose door fortune was pounding so imperatively.

Graeham was not present; he sat in his sitting-room, a dozen doors away, wrapped in a surly reverie. His mood was as bleak as an east wind; and his eyes, resting upon an open ring-box upon the table, wherein lay a gentleman's engagement ring set round with diamonds, were hard with thought and dogged with resolution. A pile of letters, worn as from many readings, lay at his elbow. He opened one, handling it with a gentle coldness, whose unconscious revelation brought a touch of irony to his lips, and read it through. It was a mere note, beginning with grave formality, that lapsed naïvely into girlishness as it went on. Graeham's hard glance softened as he read. How fascinating he had thought them but a short time before! How bewitching the frank comradeship of the later ones! how pure and unaccustomed the note that breathed

from them all! Their delicate charm had been proof against that most implacable test, — the lack-lustre eyes of a man's dead fancy. Yet, even while he noted the permanence of their charm, Graeham was flatly conscious of his own detachment when opposed to the palpitating reality of a woman's presence; Jane's glance that his own absorbed, the color in her cheek that sprang to meet him, before her eyes had fairly claimed him.

What reckless insanity the whole thing had been, as he saw it now! He had chased a shadow, and it had turned and grappled him, fastened upon him with a grip he could not shake off; the delicate charm of the romance had turned into steel coils about him. He had bound this unknown woman to him by his own voluntary act; nay, he had pursued her, wooed her, spent months in a deliberate, well-considered attempt to find her and, himself unknown, test the permanence of her charm for him. He had even gone the full length of madness in believing in her, and, drawn on by the intrinsic purity that breathed from her letters, had engaged himself to marry her; then, all in a moment, at the touch of life, the chimera had vanished, the dream sped, the link he had forged snapped. He saw the whole adventure — he could name it that to-night, with a shudder of disgust — as a bit of bizarre recklessness, upon his part; upon hers — ? Graeham thrust the letters from him, — only, however, to

bend once more above them, reading a bit here and there, unable to wholly tear his mind from them; until, as he read, their very iteration seemed to strike a new note from them, as a familiar word said over and over will dissemble its old significance. His breath came short as he hung above them, his mind clinched fast upon the intangible something in them, that had from the very first won him, tantalized him, eluded him. To-night, for the first time, he grasped it. A voice, whose lightest tone had grown hauntingly familiar, seemed to speak the words in his ear; the sentences fitted themselves to the curves of lips he knew by heart; a face, that he had tried a thousand times to evoke and failed, to-night rose unbidden from the pages, with eyes that smiled into his own. He raised the sheets to his face, and a perfume, as elusively familiar as the memory of a dream, stole from them; and, with the subtle association that lives so strongly in an odor, linked sense to sense in a mesh so imperviable that the impalpable essence of the writer's personality seemed caught in it and made tangible. It enveloped him, confused him. Which was memory? which prevision? Jane Caruth was beside him; her breath on his cheek; the perfume from her dress mingled with — nay, it *was* the perfume from this letter!

Suddenly Graeham sprang up, and with a curse thrust the letters from him, with the hard, determined gesture of a man who strips self-deception

from him and faces the inevitable with grim honesty. He took a turn across the room and back, paused at the table and lifted the ring, glanced at the date within, and put it on; finally seated himself, and with the set face of a man who closes with circumstances in a hand-to-hand fight, wrote slowly and with several pauses for reflection a letter. It was short and baldly simple, yet a film of sweat stood upon Graeham's forehead when it was done.

He enclosed it in its envelope, and that within another, which he addressed to James Goodloe; and flinging it upon the table, sat frowning and thinking.

"That ought to force her hand," he broke out, after an interval of thought. "And I'm sick of this skulking and sneaking! I'll put it to the touch. If it were only myself — But her? God! It isn't fair to her."

He rose again, paced the floor restlessly, fighting another round of the losing fight.

"Pooh!" he flung out, after a bit more of troubled musing; "I'm nothing to Miss Caruth — one among a ruck of men."

With a stubborn flush he drew off the ring, and turning deliberately to the door, crossed the hall and entered Mrs. Carlysle's reception room.

At the foundation of Graeham's character was a fund of honesty, clear-visioned and rational, underlying a strong will and impetuous desires; and he suffered as such men suffer when the fundamentals

of their natures are wrenched by the struggle between them, but he did not palter with the sneak-thief methods of self-deception. Just as he would have taken another man by the throat and kicked into him a recognition of his standards, so he took himself in hand and brought himself up to his own. He saw the situation between himself and Mary Meadows a little crudely, perhaps, as a business contract. Men made contracts every day, and sweated under them and kept them. No more was to be said along that line.

But Goodloe's argument, backed up by an obstinate cogency characteristically his own, that Mary Meadows was a name behind which some man was "studying the thing from the woman's side," stuck persistently in Graeham's mind. It was a solution, at least, of the farcical tangle; and, with characteristic decision, he had put it to the touch to-night in the letter he had written. He would free himself at a blow, or rivet his chains and reinforce himself with the irrevocable, by insisting upon an immediate marriage, assigning a business trip abroad as his reason.

When the little stir caused by Graeham's entrance had been absorbed in the steady hum of talk that filled the room, he made his way to Miss Caruth's corner, and dropped into a seat at her side.

"Not going, Clark? I rather wanted to consult you about a trip up to the falls."

"For God's sake, Graeham," protested Clark earnestly, "don't call Chinquepin's name in my hearing!"

Graeham grinned comprehendingly.

"My plan is anti-toxin. Mrs. Epperson put it into my head. She has been telling me — she is an adherent of yours, Clark — how 'perfectly divine' it would be to have Chinquepin water right in the house. So good for the complexion, you know! She thinks you are going to pipe it to her." Clark groaned. "I explained your method, and now her idea is an electric cotton-picker. Why not take the whole lay-out up the river and let 'em see for themselves, and squelch their theories about 'electric kilt-pleaters'? What the deuce *is* a kilt-pleater, Clark?"

"Blamed if I know! Get on with your plan to enlarge Mrs. Epperson's mind."

"Trip up the river, — mid-winter picnic, you know, with duck shooting in the afternoon and my men's dinner at night, and wind it all up with a ball. What do you say, Miss Caruth?"

Jane was sparkling with delicious laughter as she turned to Clark, holding Graeham with a waiting glance.

"Do you happen to remember any word more strenuous than 'strenuous,' Mr. Clark? *My* little vocabulary cannot do justice to such a programme!"

"I like to give a thing a good swing-off," ex-

plained Graeham earnestly, amid the laughter of the other two.

"Sort of 'Graeham's Day,'" murmured Clark. "Go sounding down the corridors of time, — that sort?"

"Do we count you in, then, with your crowd?"

"I'll stand for strawberries and champagne on board, yes. But if you 're thinking of making that technical speech of yours, Graeham — You should hear Graeham speak, Miss Caruth! He takes the glasses and things on the table to build wheels and high-potential stations, to explain — Does he? Certainly not!"

"You'd better be on hand, to put a spoke into some of my wheels," Graeham suggested, with cool amusement. "Clark and I, Miss Caruth, are exactly like two fellows in love with the same woman — Chinquepin is the woman in this case; — neither dares to let the other out of his sight."

Clark left them a moment after to join General DeResett, who was making his adieus.

"Do you like it in 'the corral'?" inquired Miss Caruth, with a smile rousing Graeham from the momentary abstraction into which he had frankly subsided when Clark had left them. His eyes absorbed every delicate detail of Miss Caruth's dress, with a scarcely restrained pleasure that was half artistic, half sensuous, and wholly without intention.

"'Like it'? Like sitting here by you? Like see-

ing those pearls tremble on your throat, and this fold of your gown like mist across my knee? — Yes; I like it."

His voice was but a tone above a whisper, and Jane was conscious of little dropping pauses in the talk about them, of the silken whisper of garments as their wearers turned toward their corner.

"You must n't talk about people's clothes, you know," she hurriedly admonished him, striving to keep the flutter out of her voice and the flush from her cheek. "And whatever you do, don't, don't whisper!" she concluded, with unconsciously dramatic intensity.

"All right," said Graeham aloud; "is that wrong, too?"

"It is unusual," said Miss Caruth judicially, a tiny fold in her straight brows; "and that is what really counts, you know, — the unusualness of anything."

"Jove," mused Graeham aloud, "what a pace I must be going! I've always been tough, but unusual! — "

Their gaze, resting each upon the other's, was fused into a long questioning glance. Graeham was perfectly grave, and Miss Caruth's glance was by turns speculative, reproachful, and finally affronted.

There had not appeared upon Graeham's face the instant contrition that Miss Caruth was accustomed to see upon men's faces at her faintest sign of disapproval. On the contrary, a trace of amusement,

that just escaped by a shade being tender, touched the corners of his mouth and waited in his eyes. It became clear to Jane, after an instant, that Graeham was enjoying her from some rugged height of masculinity within himself, from which her girlish tricks of manner appeared to him blended into the one pure ray of her womanhood. Alone with her thus, he would not dash the exquisite moments into froth with trivialities; he would not make pretense. Frankly, a little disconcertingly, he assumed the real juxtaposition of his manhood to her womanhood, with a manly sincerity that pierced to the deep core of feeling hidden under the girl's glaze of conventionality. She sought refuge from the intensity of the moment in a bit of play, and, under guise of arranging her floating draperies, turned from Graeham, obliterating him with a turn of her shoulder from the scheme of created things. Graeham did not attempt to break the silence that followed. Why should he? It was happiness enough to sit beside her and see the nape of her slender neck, about which was clasped the string of pearls that Callie's western lover had sent her, the puff of dark hair, from which a curl had escaped and lay just under one velvety little ear. Graeham, with man-like tidiness, longed to tuck it in. His eyes passed from the curl to the pure curve of Miss Caruth's throat, with a passing wonder that he ever should have been so crude as to admire women with white skins; but then he had

not known that a woman with Jane's exquisite mezzotinting was in the world. How lovely the pearls were on the velvet richness of her skin! His eyes lingered with vague delight upon them, and stopped suddenly with a leap at the clasp that held them, and remained riveted there intently.

The clasp was a unique one; and Goodloe, with an inspiration of good taste, had had the jeweler engrave among the arabesques that ornamented the tiny flat band the initials M M, though so minutely and so interwoven with the carving as to be indistinguishable except upon close scrutiny. As Graeham leaned forward, to interpose his shoulder between the room and Miss Caruth's dainty pretense at displeasure, his eyes were brought within a foot of the clasp, and with the acuteness of automatic vision he traced the letters amid the design.

A second passed, and another, in amused suspense upon Miss Caruth's part; upon Graeham's, in a paralysis of emotion, comparable more nearly, perhaps, to the dead calm at the storm's centre than anything else.

Meantime there had been a general exodus of the party in the reception room to the adjoining room, whence came a medley of convivial sounds: commands, issued in a tone of brief authority; a call for lemons, a smell of spices, the thump of an ice pail, the impetuous announcement of a champagne cork, followed by the cheerful clucking of the wine upon

its heels; the remonstrant click of silver and china handled by amateurs; Mrs. Carlysle's voice finally, announcing in a tone of absorbed responsibility, —

"We're nearly ready over here; somebody get the glasses."

A *frou-frou* of women's skirts, mingled with the sound of footsteps stringing out along a table; then a voice, a dozen voices, calling for a song, a drinking song.

"Mr. Graeham has a per-fectly di-vine singing mouth" — the voice was Mrs. Epperson's — "and a forehead all over bumps, the ideal musician's brow."

"Graeham, can you sing?" asked Carlysle, with his head around the doorpost.

"Sing?" echoed Graeham, starting up still dazed and shaken. "I can sing when I 'm drunk."

There was a shout of laughter from the other room, mingled with cries of —

"Chug him up on this, Carlysle! No, stop, hold on! Graeham 's a four-bottle man; he comes too high! Inspiration 's all very well, but champagne is a lot better!"

There was a hubbub of laughter, of advice and encouragement, during all of which Graeham was conscious only of Miss Caruth's distressed silence, her reproachful eyes. He steadied himself to explain.

"I mean," he said, making himself heard amid the laughter, — "what I mean is, that the one or two times in my life when I have been drunk I sang; I

don't know why, or how well. But I think—yes, I know I can sing to-night. But no! No champagne! It takes a drink divine for me; and"—slowly—"I'm half over now."

"Music is the only 'drink divine,'" said Miss Caruth, from the piano stool, as she raised her eyes wonderingly to Graeham's face. She struck a chord of "Drink to me only with thine eyes" as she spoke.

"There 's one other," said Graeham hurriedly, under cover of the accompaniment.

"Come," she said softly, and gave him the note. Without moving from where he leaned upon the piano, Graeham sang the old song through, in a voice half muted to suit the room, but with an abandon and a dramatic intensity that swept his audience off their feet. He sang again,—a vagrant bit of melody caught up from the street or the stage, with a thrill of passion through it, like an organ note lost amid the clangor of the streets at noon; and then left them, still clamoring for more, to seek the solitude of his rooms.

Graeham needed to be alone,—to tighten his grip upon himself; to find his feet amid the tide of fast-mounting, heady bliss, that was drowning reason's level accents and swamping the sane counsel of experience. Again he ranged the letters before him, marveling that he had not earlier read their secret. Each word and phrase, each deft turn of fancy, the delicate restraint, the frank reticence, held the very

essence of Jane's charm; the strong, buoyant, tender spirit of the woman infused them. It was herself — Jane, Jane!

Graeham bent his face upon the pages where her hand had lain, and saw it before his eyes, — its slender strength, the rosy nails with clean-cut facets, — and felt again the thrill of the nerve through it as it touched his own. He drew out the ring and slipped it on — Ah, the ring! Suddenly he was conscious that he had been fighting off the thought of the ring all along; he wondered half dreamily why, when it was the link that bound her to — to him!

The man started upright, his brow bending with pain as a jagged flash of comprehension tore through his mind, laying the whole thing bare to the bone before his shrinking consciousness. No dodging it; no palliating it. Naked, incontrovertible, it stared him in the face. Reason — and reason was Graeham's bulwark — presented its case with cynical dryness, and rested upon the facts.

The simple womanly words accompanying the ring, now lying upon the table before him, had not been written to him. They had pledged her, so far as her own voluntary act could pledge her, to another man, a man whom for some incredible, inexplicable reason — Graeham's reluctant mind could scarce tolerate the thought so long as it took to fit it into the chain of remorseless facts — she had agreed to marry, never having seen.

It seemed to Graeham that hours had passed before he could rouse himself to feel in a dull, reflex way, as a man waking from sleep might fumble for his identity, for his usual sane balance, to weigh the conditions confronting him and get at their real values, — wring from them an extenuation — for her! The rational view! He calmed himself by a fierce effort of self-control, hanging on to his mental poise, as a man hangs on to reason amid the mists of fever. And so welded to the innermost fibre of man's consciousness is his thought-habit — the last redoubt of character — that at Graeham's demand the inexplicable situation took on a saner aspect; a tenable hypothesis took shape before his mental eyes. His rigid muscles relaxed, and for the first time he was conscious of the sweat that poured from his face; his chest rose in an inspiration of quick relief, as he reached for his pipe. What a madman he had been to think — But he had not! Thank God for that. It had been anguish — Great God, what anguish! but not doubt. Never doubt of her — of Jane! He saw it now. D— Carlysle! A joke, of course; with Carlysle at the bottom of it, equally of course! How thoroughly in character the whole thing was with Carlysle's intricate, metaphysical prying into the springs of human action. He was a veritable human ferret to trace character — hunt down some bit of psychology to educe triumphantly as a proof of soul-meddling with the common game

of life. Of course he had drawn Miss Caruth into it, — Graeham's brow grew stern again, — she had innocently written the letters to further the elaborate, conscienceless jest. And how well it had been carried out! Carlysle's hand in that, of course, visible all the way through. Only a man in a position of authority could have insured success to every practical detail. Every clue that he had picked up in the early days when he had first come to Morganton had led him to the offices of the Development Company, and had there been lost amid the volume of business pouring through the offices, which did the business for the whole infant town. The package containing the pearls he had seen to-night upon her throat had been receipted for by Carlysle's secretary; but Carlysle's clerks handled mail for men whom Carlysle had never seen or expected to see, and it was this very fact, the impersonal character of his business, that had enabled him to carry through his game without risk of detection. Was it possible that he had deceived Jane? Graeham paused a moment, to think this out.

What had most charmed him in Jane, had been her serene detachment from the problematical side of life. She had a pure, if somewhat rigid, rectitude, that saw life as concretely right or wrong; and the clean, sweet-smelling, narrow path of right had been wide enough for her slender experiences to tread, with skirts undraggled by contact with the dubious

shades of conscience, where right overlaps wrong by a hair's-breadth, and wrong merges muddily into right by a shade. It was this immaculateness of nature that Graeham had so worshiped in her: hers was the purity that is not alone of word or deed, but is a structural part of the women who have it; every molecule in the substance of them, soul and body and spirit, alike being composed of an atom of purity combined with one of truth and womanliness.

Graeham suddenly struck the table a blow of futile wrath. How should she know or dream of the part she had been made to play? The concomitants of such a game as she had been innocently drawn into were dead letter to her, of course; the trickery, the blackmail, the hideous insinuation, the inevitable construction that the world — should the world ever know — would put upon her innocent escape. Thank God she did not know! Some day, perhaps, when she had been his wife for long happy years, sitting together with quiet hand locked in quiet hand, he might tell her of his rash meddling with fate, and of the blessed, four-leafed shamrock of fate that had saved him.

He raised the letter he had written earlier in the evening in his hand, weighing it meditatively. Let it go? Yes! 'T was better so, for her. It would bring the thing to a head; clear the way for her escape from the irksome absurdity of her position.

Graeham rose at last to retire, and laid himself down to sleep, still holding himself steadily in hand, as a man might driving along a precipice, with the reins wrapped round his fist and his eyes set hard ahead.

CHAPTER IX

. . . "Eager to end an irksome lie,
And taste our tingling, true relation."

GRAEHAM had thrown himself into the preparations for his threefold social function, with an earnestness of purpose that, backed by his trained activity, made things fall into shape with magical alacrity. Like all men who are really effective in any line, Graeham had an absolute genius for detail; and he brought it into play with precisely the same patient thoroughness, and breadth of design, in the arrangements for his winter picnic, that distinguished him as a business man.

He had taken one of the rather disreputable river boats, and had had it painted and decorated "within and without," so that upon the morning of the excursion it lay at its landing resplendent with rugs and cushions and flags, bobbing like a white duck at its rope.

And if, as Carlysle had averred earlier in the season, the stars in their courses fought for the Development Company, the very elements had united to smile upon the sponsors of the yet unborn Chinquepin Company. January, usually so chary with sunshine, came down handsomely with a day com-

posite of the charms of April and October, so crisp and calm it was; with floods of sunshine under a low blue sky, and a care-free breeze that skidded along the water, curling up ripples that purred along the boat's side and rocked the canes along the banks.

Clark's crowd, Eastern men newly arrived most of them, all with money tied up in all sorts of enterprises depending upon the power to be developed from the falls, were impatiently diverted by the social interlude introduced into a business deal, and just a trifle bored at having women along. But as the little boat took the stream, nosing the silver current like a hound, and the wind caught them a school-boy cuff upon the cheek, the half-petrified cockles of their hearts warmed with memories of stolen days along some far-away river-bank; and they leaned upon the rail, eagerly pointing out to each other the current creaming in the reeds, or a wild duck's nest among the canes, feeling, with reminiscent eyes upon the canes, their hands curl to fit the handle of a phantom jack-knife, and hearing its clean swish through the hollow stems.

And as the sky grew bluer toward noon, and the sunshine warmer on their shoulders, the Chinquepin Power Company's billion-dollar deal receded into the background; and by noon it was abundantly apparent that the afternoon's duck shooting was the real feature of the occasion, the organization of the power company but an incident. The talk took on a

sporting tone, and was a bit louder than usual ; men walked about the deck with the swagger that seems immortally resident in shooting boots, squinting knowingly at infinity along the barrels of their guns.

The women of the party were ostentatiously arrayed for a rough outing, in short skirts and thick boots ; but at the sight of the muddy river-bank and the wet fields to be traversed before the falls were reached, their interest in the financial development of Pike County, so fluently patriotic upon deck, waned. All, with the exception of Jane and Miss Cotesworth, contented themselves with waving graceful adieus to the party bound for the falls, after which they settled down to a good, poky "women talk," wherein they might be as frankly dull as ever they liked.

Miss Caruth was particularly effective, in an aggressively rough outfit, with determined boots and a short seal coat and cap, and cheeks that glowed with soft rose. Graeham, busied with his duties as host, meeting her eyes in long radiant glances across the talk, drew her care-free happiness into his sore heart, as the numb soil was drinking up the sunshine, and felt the dull ache there fade into his usual quiet happiness at her nearness.

The two girls drifted away from the group at the falls, where the men of the party stood, with feet planted wide apart in the correct newspaper attitude for the American man of affairs, when engaged in some

particularly strenuous enterprise, squinting through their fists at the falls, while they made ready-to-use estimates, and delivered them with a foxy air of its potential. The talk was all of "three-phase alternating currents," and the "head" necessary to set such and such electric dynamos spinning and keep up the high potential line current to such and such distances, all interspersed with much keen discussion as to the maximum capacity of the lovely water sprite; who was singing her syren song to their callous ears, while they argued the relative merits of Swiss or American wheels, of buckets or scoops in which she, Cinderella-like, was to be made to do the chores of commerce, instead of swirling her skirts of diamond spray and lacy mist all day in the sunshine.

"Are they done about 'impulse wheels' and 'total drops'?" inquired Mrs. Carlysle, cautiously opening her eyes. She had made herself comfortable in a nest of cushions and, frankly conserving her energies for the men of the party, left the other women to do the part of chorus when a man happened to look their way and shout an explanation they did not understand.

"It's worse than that now," sighed Mrs. Daniels, the widow with the gowns. She was really giving no attention to the men, being engaged in a calculation of her own regarding weights and measures; a computation, in fact, as to how far she dared "risk" her figure in proximity to the girlish slender-

ness of Jane and Miss Cotesworth, who were lightly scrambling among the rocks, supporting each other in perilously graceful attitudes, while they made futile grabs at the low-hanging holly boughs, with little shrieks of protest when the holly defended itself with prickly asperity against their depredations.

"Mr. Graeham is making a speech, I think; at least, he 's doing all the talking, and — is n't it too funny? The other men are not interrupting him, or talking at the same time; they are actually listening! He 's talking about a waterfall, with a perfectly indecent name; it 's in Mexico, thank heaven! and oh, they are laughing. Surely it *cannot* be at anything he said, for if ever there *was* a tiresome man!" —

"Had you any idea Graeham could talk like that?" asked old Lossing, who, had he been geared to a water-wheel himself, would have managed somehow to get loose and join the youngest girl in the party; as he joined Jane and her companion, now engaged in flinging clods at bunches of mistletoe tantalizingly displayed upon the bare boughs, with such startling irrelevancy of aim as to draw shouts of laughter from the men about the falls, and almost break up Graeham's audience.

"Four words at a time," went on Lossing, "is all he ever trusted me with. But then I never saw him under inspiration before." Jane answered with

a panting smile as she desisted, sending Graeham a long distant smile across the field, that made him stumble in his speech as he raised his cap in reply.

"You are not the only one of Mr. Graeham's friends that he has treated shabbily," she was telling Lossing, as Graeham joined them. "He has made quite a point of using only one-syllabled words when he talked to *me*, and I am a little wounded at the language he has been keeping back all this time for other people. Perhaps it *is* too much to expect him to say 'Juanacatalan' for just *me;* but if I am a person's friend" — a plaintive glance and shrug finished Graeham's rout.

"Dangerous admission, that!" chuckled Bridges, a salmon-colored veteran of finance, in Graeham's ear. "A fellow has it under the ribs when he takes to one syllable, eh, Graeham?"

"Dangerous?" queried Graeham gravely; "volts is a one-syllabled word, but it only measures force."

"The one I had reference to *is* force!" retorted Bridges over his shoulder, humorously aware of Graeham's moody discontent as he monopolized Miss Caruth, and waddled off with the gait of a joyous hippopotamus at her side. Jane was piteously bemoaning her cruel fate at missing all the real fun of the day.

"Chivalry!" she cried, with energetic disdain; "that is just why I so perfectly hate it! When *I*" — with withering emphasis — "value anything as

you pretend to value — certain things, I keep it by me. I don't set it up on some old musty shrine, where there is no fun ever, and wallow in the mire myself and have a perfectly lovely time."

The landing, when they reached it, was a cheerful medley of men and dogs and game-bags; the dogs, frantic with excitement, filling the air with whines of rapture and joyously retrieving everything in sight, and getting warmly slapped for their enthusiasm, while a little flotilla of canoes bumped at their posts.

"Should you really care to see the shooting?" asked Graeham, bending over Miss Caruth under cover of the bustle.

"Oh, — should I!" sighed she ecstatically. "May I? Can I? How can I?"

"If you don't mind the canoe being a little wet, I can't see why not, — can you?"

"Not any in the world! But — Kate might," she admitted with a laugh. "You've simply no idea how vain Kate is of her pin-feathers of matrimony. She might think this a good opportunity to air them, you know."

"If we slip over the bank, they won't see us until we are out of gun-shot range. Take care! It's beastly muddy just here. May I take you down — this time?" with a smile of memory.

"Do you think they'll open fire before we get round the bend?"

"Bridges might. It 's best to be on the safe side, and keep under the canes."

"Is n't this too delicious?" murmured Jane, as she followed Graeham along a mud path under the bending canes, with the river water licking their boots. "I feel exactly like 'the Marooners,'— don't you?"

"Yes. Give me your hand along here; this bank is infernally slippery."

"I wish something thrilly would happen," whispered Jane, with exaggerated caution and the air of a midnight assassin, setting her slim boots in Graeham's tracks and holding to his hand with a nervous clutch,— "some of those delicious things that happened to Rider Haggard's people. Have you ever noticed, Mr. Graeham, how *tame* real life is? Now why should not a bottomless chasm yawn at our feet, or a scaly monster dart from the river and pursue us? They might just as well as not."

"This is good enough for me," said Graeham.

"Oh, that! But not thrilly! Not even creepy, I should say. At least *I* don't feel creepy"— her tone was slightly disparaging. "But I have heard or read somewhere that — er — that nature is gradually suppressing the heroic element in men, because they don't need it any more"— this conclusion in a distinctly snubbing tone.

"Give me your other hand," said Graeham.

"*Have* you shivers up your backbone, Mr. Graeham?" insisted Jane sternly.

"Not my backbone; I have mine in my heart. Here 's the canoe. If you 'll be so kind as to supply the formula for putting a lady into a wet, not to say sloppy, canoe, we 'll get under way."

Jane ignored him, and seated herself with as much dignity as an alternately wobbling and bucking canoe would admit.

"My basket is a good bit down the river," Graeham explained, as he turned the canoe into the stream, where the sun on its first downward slant was paving the current with patines of pure gold.

"Basket? But I forgot that this is your day for saying extraordinary things," said Jane, with soft impertinence; and with laughing eyes upon Graeham, she softly hummed "The Owl and the Pussy Cat went to Sea."

Jane had been conscious once or twice during the day of an under-note in Graeham, that had puzzled her, — a concentrated gravity it seemed to be, that wore through his ordinary mood like steel through a scabbard. She had seen him steal a moment from the talk about him, to spend in silent colloquy, several times that day; and as he sat before her, sending the little boat along with strong strokes, she saw the shadow of the same abstraction fall once more upon him, as she watched him with shy solicitude that would not acknowledge a right to be wounded by his reticence.

Graeham's basket proved to be a wigwam upon a

hummock close to the river, improvised from two cotton baskets overturned a little space apart, and roofed with sheaves of cane and underbrush. Miss Caruth gave a shriek of rapture as Graeham, holding the trailing canes aside, invited her to enter; and creeping in, curled herself, school-girl fashion, upon the carpet of raw cotton that lined it.

"It is exactly like the playhouses I used to build long — so long ago! And oh, that darling, cunning little window, with a perfectly dis-tracting view of the river!"

"That 's for the gun-barrel," explained Graeham, disposing of himself by lying flat upon the cotton at Jane's side. "You should have seen the nigger's face when I told him to put the cotton in! It 's a lark to have a girl along, is n't it? Now I 'll give you a point or two about the sport; and then we must n't talk, you know."

"Why?"

"The ducks will hear us."

"Oh!"

Silence ensued, except for the voices of the woods and the river and the fields, that filled the interlude with a soft symphony of their own: the thud of chestnuts falling on dead leaves; the shrill soprano of a squirrel's bark in the wood behind them; the wash of the current round the point; the reeds softly grounding arms as the wind touched them.

"Am I too close?" whispered Graeham.

No answer. Miss Caruth's eyes were upon the shining reaches of the river where, just in sight round the point, a white breast was splitting the current into long slivers of silver, followed by a string of wobbling, gliding forms, whose snake-like necks dipped from side to side in the water.

"I meant, are you afraid of the gun?" supplemented Graeham.

"I thought we were not to talk?"

"You are sure it won't jar you when the gun goes off?"

"Do you suppose I never heard a gun shoot?" asked Miss Caruth, with superb disdain.

"It isn't considered good sport to look out of the hole all the time," suggested Graeham, his gaze unalterably upon the curve of Jane's cheek, the wave of her hazel hair springing crisply from her brow, the lift of her long straight lashes over her forward gaze. A tide of scarcely to be restrained joy beat in him, making the blood pound in his temples and his heart labor in his breast. She was his own; and for the moment, in the swift tide of passion sweeping him away, it seemed to Graeham that it mattered not how. Yet even in that moment, he weighed swiftly the chance of telling her all. Why not risk it? But like all men with strong wills and impetuous impulses, Graeham had the fixed habit of restraint, distrusting his own impetuosity; and reason laid her coercive

hand upon him now. No; silence was best, safest, for her — for them both in the future. She must never know that he knew.

"Why not?" asked Miss Caruth, in reply to his hint on sporting form.

"The ducks will see you," smiled Graeham.

"They are not looking," — coolly; — "they are busy dipping."

"By George!" Graeham sprang to his knee. "Sit tight," he commanded absently, sighting along the barrel, with his finger on the trigger. Miss Caruth gazed at him in fascinated terror for a second, and the next had flung herself upon his arm, shaking Graeham to and fro in her panic.

"Oh, don't, don't!" she shrieked; "what a shame! They are so pretty, so happy."

A report from the gun plunged through the golden quiet of the afternoon, followed instantly by the other barrel exploding harmlessly in the air. With a whistling of swift wings the ducks, seen in a huddle for a second against the sky, strung out and sailed off; a puff of gray feathers afloat upon the air, and a limp form in the dog's mouth, all that remained to tell the tale of the afternoon's sport.

Graeham stared at his companion in fast gathering indignation, lost upon Miss Caruth, whose face was buried upon her knees, with hands pressed tight upon her ears.

"Well, I'll be dog-goned!" said he, when he had got his breath; "if you are n't a nice chum to go duck shooting with!"

"Are you done?" murmured Jane, raising her face, sparkling with laughter, from her knees. "Will it shoot any more?"

"Done! Rather. One beggarly bird out of that lot! Hec, old boy, you'd as well go chase a rabbit; ducks are not for us."

"If you would like to beat me with the gun, — if you'd feel more resigned, — you may," suggested Jane meekly.

Graeham was laying his gun aside, with elaborate finality, and did not reply.

"It is quite a good bit of fun to watch them, from the hole," Miss Caruth advanced, with a faint suspicion of coaxing in her tone.

"Oh, quite!" said he, with blunt sarcasm, and after that no more was said. Jane found a chestnut presently, and with an air of magnanimously forgiving Graeham for his bad temper, proffered him a half. He suffered himself to be forgiven, and they ate it together like boy and girl.

"You look like a country girl to-day, with your cheeks all rosy and your little muddy boots," said Graeham, lying at his ease at Jane's feet, with a light of deep contentment in his eyes.

"Do you care for country girls?" asked Miss Caruth, in an impersonal tone. Graeham stared at

the green roof a foot above his head, as he considered.

"I had no clear idea of what I liked in a woman," he said at last; adding, "until I met you," as though he expected the firm deliberation of the words to palliate their significance. He went on in a tone of musing comradeship, as if the words could mean nothing to either of them.

"When I was a lad I was a common fellow, you know, — not a whit better than the lot I ran with; but even a rough lad has his ideas about women, and"— He arrested himself, frankly leaving the hiatus unfilled, and took up his subject farther along. "And after, when I could pick and choose" — He broke off again, with a smile this time. "I'm afraid I 'm not altogether in character for the 'picture-paper Westerner,' after all. I did n't strike pay gravel in the approved style; I made my money, and I had had time to grow with it. But I never could shake the old ideas I had when I was a lad; they clung to me even. In books and plays, they call it a man's ideal?"

"Yes," said she softly, — "'their vision splendid,' you know; but in books and plays — most of them — they say men lose it."

"I had never lost mine, and I had never realized it until I stumbled in here at Morganton and — met you."

The duck lay upon the ground beside them; and

as they talked, Miss Caruth touched it tenderly, smoothing its iridescent plumage, ruffled by the shot, with a hand that was not quite steady. A pang, compounded of irrational joy and equally irrational jealousy, pierced Graeham, as he noted among the rings she wore a narrow band of diamonds. When he could think again, he roused himself to catch the end of Miss Caruth's sentence, the beginning of which he had not heard.

". . . And of late I have thought more of it. It has been brought rather pointedly to my mind, by a — by something that has happened. I mean, just how far one should allow a past experience to affect a decision that is of the present and the future. Do you think, Mr. Graeham, that one could — or that one should, if one could — elide a portion of one's life, as one would score out an ambiguous phrase in a letter?"

Graeham paused upon his answer, yearning toward the girl with an exquisite pang, as he met her earnest eyes under tense brows.

"Men and women do lop off dead years," he began gravely, choosing his words carefully, — "barren experiences, futile hopes, outlived fears; but they do not, I think, rid themselves altogether of them: they go on feeling them, like the ghost of a severed limb, to the end of their lives, — and beyond, if life has a logical sequence — not the spectacular ones perhaps, but the vital ones, yes."

Jane's eyes were upon the band of diamonds on her finger.

"I put this ring on to-day, to remind me to ask you a question."

"To ask *me?* Me!"

"If it will not bore you— Jim says you have the sanest judgment"—

Graeham laughed a bit unsteadily as he moved away, that Jane might not hear the pounding of his heart.

"If any such luck as serving you came my way, I should trust my judgment, I suppose; but my judgment where you are concerned is worth about as much as a compass in an iron mine," he wound up bluntly. "What is this I am to advise about?"

Miss Caruth turned the ring about her finger meditatively, the wicked little eyes of the diamonds seeming to spy out their mates in Graeham's trousers' pocket, and wink with satiric intelligence.

"It is about love," said Jane at last.

"The love of a man for a woman?"

"I only know one side of the story, but the friend —I told you it was a friend's case, did I not?— the friend is a woman, and I think she — she *must* love him."

Her eyes were full of troubled frankness as they rested upon Graeham's.

"It seems a little disingenuous to ask your ad-

vice and give you only half confidences, but there is a promise, and for her sake."

"I think I see how it is," said Graeham. "It is the other way round, perhaps, — the love of a woman for a man?"

"I think so," said Miss Caruth, very low. She did not meet his eyes, but sat with downcast eyes upon the ring, slowly turning it about her finger.

"Ah? Suppose I help you out a bit? Is there another man in the case?"

"Yes; oh, yes! And she is engaged to one of them."

"And loves the other fellow?"

"How well you understand! Yes."

Graeham paused to steady his voice before he went on.

"I 'm not so sure I do. What 's the hitch?"

"That is what I could not think out — what you are to advise about, please. Is she — do *you* think she is bound in honor to tell him — the man to whom she is engaged, I mean — about — about the other, or could she" —

"Funk it?" smiled Graeham, with tender eyes upon the girl's downcast face. His voice was a little hoarse and unmanageable, as he went on gravely: "Women call all sorts of things love, Miss Caruth; but if your friend loves this fellow, *loves him*, you know, for all time and eternity" — His voice broke rebelliously, but his ardent eyes car-

ried on his meaning. "Does she love him like that?"

Jane fought a moment with the wave of color that threatened to submerge her, struggled to keep her lashes at a level poise over gravely attentive eyes, and succumbed.

"Yes," she whispered, "yes!"

And Graeham, as he lay at her feet, turned his head and pressed his lips to the hem of her walking-skirt.

"Then she must tell the other man," he said thickly; "and the sooner the better."

They said no more for a space, and the silence between them was like a living presence, with a hand in each of theirs drawing them nearer to each other. Jane, with her face turned from Graeham, pulled nervously at a feather in the duck's wing.

"Let me," said he absently; and thrusting a finger beneath it, drew it forth. A drop of blood clung to its end, and Graeham searched his pockets vainly for a scrap of paper.

"Wait," said Jane; and thrusting her hand within her coat, drew out a couple of unopened letters. Without glancing at the addresses, she stripped the envelope from one and handed it to Graeham.

Across it was written, in his own handwriting, the name: "Miss Mary Meadows, Morganton, Alabama." He slipped the feather within it, and dropping back to his place lay staring at the green canes above his head, with eyes that saw them not.

CHAPTER X

"Why should I blame the brass that burnished up will blaze to all but me as good as gold?"

THERE was a steadily rising gale of merriment in Mrs. Carlysle's reception room, where the water party, muddy but hilarious, was partaking of afternoon tea with the guests arrived by the later afternoon train, for the ball that night. The talk was of the sort that gayly flouts the term conversation, disdaining the staid vehicle of question and reply, and relying frankly upon pitch as a medium of communication. The men present, in a ratio of a dozen to every woman, were busily booking engagements for the ball that night,—with laughing shrewdness, and a very business-like appreciation of the value of the bird in the hand over its problematical mate in the bush,—with girls who, with a no less provident eye upon the main chance, "reserved spaces" for the fish in the sea who might be as good, and, for all one knew, a lot better than the one wriggling on the hook.

Graeham's strenuous programme had taxed the little colony severely in the way of femininity, and the two tiny wrinkles that had adorned Mrs. Carlysle's brow intermittently for days past, threatened to be-

come permanent. They were augmented this afternoon by an air of tragic calm, as she tucked a note into her girdle and glanced about the room for Graeham.

She discovered him, the centre of a bunch of girls, to whom he had just been introduced, and stood watching him a minute smilingly before calling him. Graeham was concentrating himself with frowning gravity upon the pith ball of talk they were lightly keeping in the air, naïvely losing his footing every other minute in the slippery sands of their gay innuendo, and the many piled meanings that flickered from eye to eye among them. He was floundering heavily, as she easily made out, in spite of the oil the girls were spreading upon the waters for him. Mrs. Carlysle faced him, as he reached her side, with the air of being at her last ditch and her last round of ammunition.

"What is it?" inquired Graeham, visibly bracing himself to bear the blow.

"The most tiresome thing possible! I particularly dislike unexpectedness in people, do not you, Mr. Graeham? The gravest fault — a crudity even — would be bearable, if it were only consistent. A note from Miss Cotesworth — so inconsiderate of her! Why, she has sprained her ankle at the very last moment. Now, yesterday, or the day before, it would not have mattered in the least."

"A sprained ankle is no joke," said Graeham,

with earnest sympathy; "and I hardly think she did it on purpose, do you?"

"Perhaps not," conceded Mrs. Carlysle, with a tender, quizzical glance at Graeham, that greatly surprised him; "though it really does not matter in the least if she did, as long as she has thrown us out this way. The question is, Mr. Graeham, whom *can* we put in her place?"

Graeham carried his glance alertly about the room, sparkling with women's faces, and returned to his companion's face of dramatic intensity with a smile.

"Haven't we enough women? I never saw such a lot before, except in a ballet. And keen! George! that black-eyed one, with dimples, has the nerve of a life assurance association."

"Never mind that now," returned Mrs. Carlysle absorbedly; "keep out of Grace De Resett's way until I have time to tell you what to do. Jane *can* lead, in Miss Cotesworth's place, but — but Peter Clark? It leaves Peter without a partner."

"Is that all? Cut Clark out."

Mrs. Carlysle passed this with judicial calm.

"Who? Who?" she mused desperately. "We — just — simply — must — have — a woman, if we have to put a man into a gown! My things could be made to fit Teddy Chapman," she went on meditatively, eyeing young Chapman with a glance that took his latitude and longitude. "Men are very compressible,

you know; and after he had been taken in a little in the waist" —

"But Chapman would be such a brute in a gown, none of the other fellows would take him out, and we'd be just where we were," urged Graeham, with a remonstrant frown. "Let's think of something else."

"What else? What possible equivalent is there for a woman!" with despairing logic.

"What the deuce are you two talking about?" asked Carlysle curiously, over his wife's shoulder, as he joined them. "There's no use wasting talk like that on Graeham, Kate. *I* might make a stagger at solving feminine X Y Z's, but Graeham!"

The situation was made plain to him, with dramatic pauses and much tense play of his wife's fine brows, and he promptly soared to the occasion with an inspirational suggestion.

"What's the matter with our little guest from 'She-car-go'? She'll fill the bill."

Graeham's face reflected Carlysle's own satisfaction at his suggestion, but Mrs. Carlysle's displayed a vacuum, faintly tinged with reproof.

"Think of some one else, dear," she murmured gently.

"Don't trample on me, Kate," laughed Carlysle, "with that 'stony British stare.' If you want to swear at me, well and good; but I refuse to be 'gorgonized.' 'Impropriety'? I'll lay either of you

any odds you like, that little Callie's blood is as blue — if that's the hitch — as Miss Cotesworth's, and she simply is n't in it with Callie, for looks. Run her in, Kate; and give the girl a bit of fun, do. The house is full of strangers, and who is to know? Besides, she 's the daughter of a dear old chum of mine — or the sister, — sister of a college chum, old John Larkin, bless him; have n't thought of him for ages until he wrote that his sister was passing through. You 'd take the inspiration out of Beethoven, Kate! What if Alabama *is n't* on the way to anywhere? Besides, it is; it 's on the way to Florida. Slue round a bit; it 's not necessary to be categorical — detail is horribly vulgar. She 's going on 'further,' and stopped over a night en route, eh, Graeham?"

"Good!" said Graeham, with a laugh. "Miss Larkin is quite a chum of mine."

Mrs. Carlysle consulted their faces, with more tense play of brows.

"Is this one of your little variations from the normal, Jim?"

"Not at all! I never was saner in my life."

"But her grammar! Think of her grammar, both of you! Fancy, just fancy her, if you please, saying 'shucks!' in the middle of the cotillon. I beg pardon, she *is* quite capable of it."

"Do you suppose," began Carlysle, in the bored tone of a man forced to argue a perfectly obvious

proposition, "do either of you suppose — Graeham, I put it to you as a man — that any man in his senses, and with his eyesight, would bother about what sort of grammar issued from a mouth like Callie's?"

"I have so often pointed out to you, dear, that mouths are the stronghold of character; and Callie's mouth is her worst feature. Really nice women never have those deep dimpled corners to their mouths. Do you suppose she can dance, either of you?"

"Why, she dances all the time," put in Graeham indiscreetly, — "even when she sweeps."

"Sweeps?" Mrs. Carlysle's glance was slightly speculative. "Callie is not a maid. If she were, it would be quite impossible. And as it is, if anything dreadful happens" —

"Graeham and I are to blame," smiled her husband. "Come, I'll make you a business proposition; if you and Jane will rig her out, Graeham and I will assume her social liabilities. Come now, that's fair enough."

Mrs. Carlysle weighed them contemplatively as Callie's social sureties.

"After a men's dinner, Jim," she vouchsafed him suavely, "you'd assume anything."

As ten o'clock drew on, a hushed expectancy invaded the big hotel, that lay in the midst of the black fields about it, like the beast in the Apocalypse glow-

ing with eyes before and behind; while the winter stars, wheeling their silent courses above it, marked the flight of the fevered hours within.

The empty ballroom, with its myriad lights splintering long lances on the polished floor, held its breath in glittering silence; but from the distant dining-room, where Graeham, a somewhat absent-minded host, presided, gusts of men's laughter rose, accompanied by the quick patter of applause, following some speaker's rolling periods or the stuttering brilliancy of old Lossing's toasts.

Meantime, above stairs, the real business of the day went forward, amid an impressive hush. Behind the long rows of closed doors, the women were dressing for the ball.

In her slip of a room at the top of the house, Callie stood before her eight-inch mirror, looking through it to the "vision of the world and all the wonders that would be." The hour was the girl's apotheosis. She was being born anew, into an evening gown. Her soul had been born in the moment when, for the first time in her life, she saw the tinted ivory of her bust rising from the rose-colored folds of her low corsage; and, for good or evil, Callie knew herself to be a winged spirit, with dominion over the hearts of men.

She wore a ball gown of Miss Caruth's, of deep rose-colored gauze garnished with trailing sprays of wild roses, and from beneath its folds her slender feet

with high-arched insteps peeped forth, clad in the envied rose-colored slippers that she had described to Graeham; the polished whiteness of her long arms was half obscured by the folds of her gloves, and a fan of curling, rose-hued tips drooped languidly from one hand; heavy strands of rose-hued coral were about her neck and waist. She stood before the mirror entranced, and with half-shut eyes slowly raised and let fall the folds of gauze over the silk petticoat beneath, the rustle of the silk thrilling her with the rush of emotions that moment born. The girl's nature trembled to its crisis. Heredity, folded like a bud within her, stirred and burst its shallow calyx. Marthy McGuion, reckless, seductive, smiled back from the dim little mirror, reincarnate in the rose-colored folds. She bent backward, supplely, and, with eyes still upon her image, caught up the train of her gown and flung it with dainty elegance over her arm; and as she did so, the curve of her long throat, the droop of her lashes over beryl-tinted eyes, pierced her with a pang of sensuous joy and triumph. She longed, with a longing as imperative as thirst, to see the full sweep of the folds about her form, the lustre on the satin richness of her skin; but the sullen bit of mirror gloomed back at her, tantalizing her with fleeting glimpses only. At any other time her pass-key would have admitted her to a dozen empty rooms, where she might have gloated at her pleasure; but to-night the house was

running over with guests. Callie ran the rooms over in her mind, as she pouted disdainfully at the despised mirror. Then temptation jogged her elbow. Graeham's rooms would be empty at this hour. Graeham himself was safe at the dinner party. She hesitated, with the inevitable result. A moment later, with her rose-hued robes of mirth tucked up, she was speeding down the servants' stairway to Graeham's rooms. Come what might, she must have one look, one distracting swirl of those rose-colored skirts in the mirror lights.

Her heart beat quickly as she turned on the lights at the mirror, but one glance within swept prudence from her mind. She preened daintily, like a white pigeon on the roof in the sunlight; each touch of her unconsciously adept fingers, like a sculptor's chisel, refining into elegance some commonplace line, or bringing into prominence some hitherto unsuspected grace.

Yet to her newly awakened consciousness, for all her loveliness, there was some vague want, something lacking that should be there. She stepped back from the mirror and, poised in one of Miss Caruth's attitudes, looked critically at her own reflection. It was an admirable rendition of the spirited and finished grace of Miss Caruth's manner, and extending her hand to some shadowy courtier, who appeared to be advancing to meet her from mirror land, she walked forward airily to meet him;

but in the act she paused, fascinated by her own beauty.

"I 'm prettier 'n her," she mused slowly, aloud, as though the triumphant knowledge could not longer be contained in her own bosom. "Gran'ma was er 'ristocrat befo' th' wah, 'n' I look like th' befo'-th'-wah folkses in the pictures in pa's old house in Pike. It 's my old house, — 'n' Chinquepin is mine, — 'n' — 'n' — Peter. But I don't want none er them; not none uv them. I want *him*."

The thought was imperative enough to drag her eyes from the mirror, and she wandered about the room sunk in thought, beating her gloved hands together softly, in a gesture full of futile, passionate regret.

"'F I 'd on'y told him at first! 'F I on'y had! He 'd er overlooked it — 'n' I could make him love me. 'F I 'd on'y met him like I am to-night! But I ken make him love me — I ken, I ken! Th' money may go — pooh! money; 'n' Peter — all, all except" — She did not finish the sentence, but for a moment a mist dimmed the radiance of her eyes; she raised her hand absently to her bosom, as though a baby's head lay there and she hushed it to sleep.

She was too restless amid the conflict of her thoughts, of the vague new possibilities that she felt about her like wings brushing her in the darkness, to be still; and she resumed her aimless walk, pausing at last beside the writing-table to mechanically

straighten the articles upon it. A half-smoked cigar lay beside the blotter, closed upon some written sheets upon which the ink seemed scarce dry, as Callie pored over them with knitted brows and flushed cheeks. It was difficult work for her; but she stumbled on, following the sense with difficulty, — now losing it altogether, now helped by her partial knowledge of the text of the letter itself to unravel the skein, — and at last, with panting bosom and angry eyes, dragging its meaning from it as it were by main force.

She did not move when she had finished it, but stood in a trance of thought, her form seeming to stiffen as she stood. She was not consciously planning; but her brain, with its odd, left-handed functioning, reached forward to a decision which seemed independent of any intermediate process of reason.

As she replaced the sheets, a smile as inconsequent and malicious as a water-pixie's trembled at the corners of her mouth, and she struck her hands together with a gesture of uncertain triumph.

"It's not 'honorable' to deceive him, she said to-night! He must be told — told erbout Mary Meadows's 'past.' O God! won't they never let me furgit it! I cannot be good when I remember — cannot! She may tell him — now," she ended slowly, with hands clinched at her sides, "jest as soon as ever she likes — now."

A line of sweat broke out upon her delicate lip,

as she stood like a creature braced in mortal combat against herself. A bitter, nauseating consciousness of herself rose in her mind like gall, as she saw herself through the eyes of Carlysle and Miss Caruth. In the sharp glare of humiliation she saw herself a pariah, half scorned, half pitied by them; an outcast whom they had touched with their finger ends in gingerly charity. The grisly memory of the night when she had returned to her father's house with her child, rose like a visible presence of desolation, dimming her beauty with its black shadow of shame; the horror of the words he had used to her froze her eyes, as she recalled them in their primitive Biblical frankness; her mother's shame that he had flung in her shrinking face — all rushed upon her and struck her down. Graeham would think the same if he knew. He would use just such words as her father had used; would call her — A smothered cry rose in her throat.

"I'm not," she sobbed, with dry sobs; "I 'm not that! Not what they think. I 'm not — I 'm not! 'F I had er chanst they 'd see. We was 'ristocrats befo' th' wah."

The sound of the opening door roused her, and wheeling swiftly, she met Graeham's amused eyes as he came forward from the sitting-room beyond.

"Primping by my mirror, eh?" he said good-naturedly. "So you are going to the ball?"

He glanced her over with careless admiration,

that melted into something warmer as the full measure of her beauty had time to sink into his senses.

"You 're a corker in evening dress! And you got the little pink gown — and the boots?"

Too shaken with the agitation of the moment before to speak, Callie silently advanced one pretty foot for Graeham's inspection. Anger had given her a tremulous agitation, flushing her cheeks and deepening her eyes, until in sober prose they were what Clark had called them, — the color of the midnight sky. The long folds of her gown about her on the floor added a new and bewitching dignity to her form; in her rose-colored draperies she looked a great lady to her fingers' ends, and Graeham's eyes told her so with reckless frankness.

"Do you like my dress — gown?"

"Do I?" Graeham came a step nearer her, his eyes alight with admiration. "You 're as pretty as a red, red rose!"

"You said I was n't — once."

"I lied. You need something to shine, in that lace." He stepped to the table and overturned his case of pins, and selecting several, bent to pin them in, his hand against the warm whiteness of her shoulder. "And your hair is n't right. Girls wear things in that built-up part when they go to dances — Wait."

Standing behind her, Graeham detached a rose

from her corsage and placed it awkwardly in her hair. Callie stood motionless, scarce breathing, an intoxicating sense of power filling her like a draught of strong wine, as her eyes met Graeham's in the mirror, reading in them a sequel to the hour that he little dreamed of. They contemplated the effect of the rose together, in silence. Callie's slight, brilliant figure thrown out against the black and white of Graeham's dress; his strong, dark head contrasted with the vivid delicacy of hers, — floated upon the clear surface of the mirror like a softly tinted water-color. It caught Graeham's eye; and with an amused consciousness of attitudinizing, he dropped his arms about the girl in the conventional stage embrace, and stood looking down upon her with a smile.

"Don't we make a dandy water-color? What a magnificent pose — so, a little this way. Jove, how lovely you are in this pink gown! Some chap's going to go mad over you some day, do you know it, Callie? He'll pour out his money like sand at your feet."

With a supple turn she faced him, slipping her arms about his neck, holding him off to look into his eyes, with her black brows gathered stormily, her breath fluttering in her bosom.

"His money!" she echoed, with tremulous scorn; "I don't want none uv his money. 'F he could n't pour out his love — his self — his heart, at my feet,

I would n't — would n't " — Her voice broke, and Graeham's eyes, hot with admiration, steadied into what was very nearly tenderness.

"Not?" he said gently, noting with wonder the stormy heaving of her bosom, the passionate intensity of her face, where the color had slipped away. "Foolish little child! Suppose he had nothing else to give?"

"Why not?" she demanded passionately. "Why should I not have his love? Why must she have all — all, 'n' me nothin'? I 'm prettier 'n her."

"Prettier than whom, child?" inquired Graeham, roused by her passion. "What are you talking about?"

"Than Miss Caruth."

Graeham recoiled sharply; he unlocked her hands from his neck, and put her from him in silence.

"Don't ever mention Miss Caruth's name to me again," he said quietly.

Callie stood motionless where he had left her, her hands clinched at her sides, her eyes like brilliant agates, touched with the bravado of the gambler who has doubled his stake and lost it.

"Air she too good fur me to call her name?" she demanded passionately.

"Yes," said Graeham coldly.

The word struck the girl like a blow, and for a second the very flesh upon her bones recoiled under it; then she answered to it as a racer might answer

to the lash across his flank, with a tremor as her stiffening muscles drew her rigidly erect. Facing Graeham with superb assertion, she measured him with a glance of cold, controlled scorn, — the scorn whose cutting edge is not the resentment of an equal so much as the reproof of a superior.

"You air mistaken, Mr. Graeham," she told him with level incisiveness, that sent her meaning home with the simple assertion of the fact, disdaining asseveration; "my folkses were 'ristocrats befo' th' wah."

Graeham moved restlessly. "It is n't that," he interrupted her, regarding her with thoughtful eyes as she stood before him, every line in her beautiful form breathing an arrogant pride of birth; the haughty curve of her throat, the imperious bend of her brow, the insolent droop of her lashes over a glance of icy restraint, — speaking the inalienable consciousness of caste. "It is n't that; I've always known you had good blood. That don't count."

"Bein' er 'ristocrat don't count?" she echoed blankly. "Then what does count?"

Graeham's glance, half speculative, half pitiful, rested upon her in silence. He shuddered slightly as the perfectness of her beauty, vivified, almost ennobled, by the feeling that swayed her, penetrated his senses, like an essence that deadens the nerves through excess of sweetness.

"The only thing that counts with me — if you mean me — is the one thing you lack."

"What do I lack?" she demanded, confronting him with a courage that was as far from hardihood as it was pitifully far from innocence. "What do I lack that — that Miss Caruth has?"

"I cannot tell you," he said gently, "unless — Stay; I called you a red rose a bit ago. Well," — he looked gravely down into the eyes she raised to his own, full of insistent question, — "well, there are roses, you know, child, and there are — stars."

"Why — why" — she stammered breathlessly.

". . . Men want the stars because they can't get them; and they do not care for the roses because" — With a storm of color she took his meaning at last, and with a long light step reached his side, and raising her gloved hand struck him fiercely across the lips.

She stood an instant longer facing him, with head erect, her eyes dark with inexplicable meanings, — a swooning pride, an agony of shame, of anger, of despair; turned upon him; then gathering up her rose-colored skirts she left him, walking proudly with unlowered head from his sight.

CHAPTER XI

"Love's so different with us men!"

THE paneled room, which had been converted into a ballroom for Graeham's use, was considered the Midland's crack exhibit.

Its conception had been a spark struck from Carlysle's versatile genius, as a tribute to the land the gods of Morganton had made their own; and it was, indeed, a dignified and splendid embodiment of the enthusiastic loyalty of the young financiers for their adopted State, as well as a naïvely shrewd advertisement of her resources. It was a nobly proportioned room, paneled in quartered oak hewn from the Development Company's own lands, halfway to the groined and vaulted ceiling; the intervening space, divided into medallions by scones of dull silver, was decorated by a series of exquisite views from the surrounding landscape. Crawdorn, an erratic young genius, who in a fit of divine sulks with his muse had thrown in his lot with the Development Company, in the first "fine careless rapture" of his passion for Alabama, had spent himself unstintedly upon his paintings, grasping with fine artistic sense the buoyant spirit of the land beneath its languorous serenity. He had fixed forever upon his

canvas the subtle fascination of the South to these hard-headed young business men, who had come to Alabama to make money and found themselves constrained to make love, enamoured against their wills by the soft seductive witchery of a land "where it is always afternoon." He had caught and prisoned on his canvas the soul of the landscape, in glimpses of dim blue mountain ranges veiled in mist; the brown, mysterious aisles of endless pine woods; the zigzag flight of a covey of partridges across a cornfield; a spit of silver-green cane hiding a wild duck's nest; Chinquepin in her lovely Undine mood singing among the pines, or a rugged bit of the open country strewn with ore-veined rocks; a stretch of the river like a nether sky, "winding clearly to the sea."

Over the chimney-piece the panel was built solidly into the wall, and showed in the background a dim land in ruins, — a dead land, stark and cold, one felt it to be, — half hidden by bands of mist, like a winding-sheet across its face. The only touch of light amid the browns and grays and dusky purples of the landscape, was a band of clear orange behind the mountains. It was the orange that precedes sunrise, and its light fell full upon a lovely female form in the foreground, standing with strong, white arms extended toward the east, her noble, beautiful face turned back across her shoulder to the dead land at her feet; and, so perfectly had the artist

interpreted the spirit of the country that he painted, the smile of hope upon the frank young mouth of the New South, and the deep glance that she cast backward full of love and renunciation, were touched with a trace of the martyrdom that has been the portion of those who have lived, no less than those who have died, for Dixie.

The room was without upholstery, depending for its expression upon its wall decorations; and the lights that struck upward from the polished oaken floor were lost in the mellow shade above or absorbed by masses of palms that were grouped about the archways, softening the vistas in every direction with an effect austerely simple. The great room was empty, save for the musicians behind their screen of palms, waiting like a great undaubed canvas for its figures.

The ball hung upon the host, and Graeham upon Mrs. Carlysle, who awaited in her reception-room, with visible nervousness, the appearance of her husband, who had been despatched to fetch their guest, Miss Larkin from Chicago, who, en route to Florida, had stopped a night with the Carlysles. Peter Clark, Miss Larkin's partner in the cotillion, waited beside Mrs. Carlysle with his usual graceful impassivity, that covered to-night a profound indifference, only half hearing the lady's gracious explanations.

"A special providence, Peter, — nothing short of it! Yes, — the daughter of an old friend of Jim's,

or a sister, it is. Chicago! 'No good cometh out of Nazareth?' Fie, for shame! Wait until you see Callie, and be properly ashamed of your heresy. Yes, her name *is* Callie — oh, Calthea, I believe, is n't it, Jane? Quite a quaint old name — um — um! Family name? — yes. You do not know yet *how* lucky you are! She is a beautiful girl, but — er — a little unsophisticated. Her first ball! — think of that! You must be lovely to her, Peter, and put her on to things, you know."

"You are awfully good to give me the chance, and you are to understand that my 'loveliness' to her will be limited only by what I think she will stand for, coming from — er — the West."

"Here!" broke in Graeham menacingly; and Clark amended, with a smile, —

"The Middle West. But about putting her on. My dear lady, suppose you put *me* on! I 'm awfully unsophisticated, myself. Is Miss Larkin's lack of sophistication, for instance, a matter of degree or the simon-pure article? It 's just as well to know, you know, in case" —

"Tut, tut!" smiled Mrs. Carlysle reprovingly. "Is this the way you appreciate my confidence in you? It is the real thing, I assure you.

"'Oh, milk and water; oh, mirth and innocence!'"

"Better not put anything on futures, Clark," admonished Graeham, with a sage shake of the head.

"Be sure of the quality of the milk and water before you plunge."

"What, have you seen her?"

"Sure. She's a corker."

"Do you remember Rose-Red-and-Snow-White in the fairy book, Mr. Clark?" inquired Jane, by way of supplementing Graeham's terse description.

"Young ladies with four hyphens in their names are a cut above me," Clark deprecated; "but — I say, Mrs. Carlysle, is there anything here to — ah, to drink, you know? My nerves are not what they once were, and really I'm very much agitated by all this."

"Pinaud's double extract of White Carnation?"

"Thanks, no; I never take anything stronger than" — the words died on his lips, exhaled slowly in a gasp of surprise.

Carlysle was advancing through the long suite of rooms, with a woman on his arm whose slender shape shrunk shyly against him, as though she sought to conceal herself from the eyes turned upon her. No one noticed Clark's unfinished sentence; an odd tension had fallen upon the little group, a tension that suggested in some inexplicable way a personal interest, keen and suppressed, by each spectator in the scene that went forward, as though upon the stage where each actor waited in silence for his cue.

Carlysle reached his wife's side, and resigned his charge to her with graceful ceremony. Callie stood

erect, with head well up upon her long straight throat, and her eyes, under the heavy shadow of their lashes, immovably upon Clark's face, in a gaze too serene for defiance yet full of a hard challenge. She returned the greetings of the other two with a quiet word, and dropped easily into an attitude of repose at Mrs. Carlysle's side. Mrs. Carlysle presented Clark in a couple of words, and the two saluted each other, still with the odd air of listening for the prompter's voice in the wings. The girl was no whit behind the man in graceful ease; if anything, Clark was the more shaken of the two. A slight flush had replaced his momentary pallor and an imperceptible smile curled the corners of Callie's mouth, as they gazed steadily at each other.

"Mrs. Carlysle has been awfully good to me, Miss Larkin," said Clark, crossing the space to her side. "She has put your happiness for the evening into my hands. May I assume my guardianship at once?" He offered his arm as he spoke, and Callie laid her hand within it, with the same upward lift of her lashes that she had practiced on her friend in the mirror an hour before.

"I ought to be willin' to trust you, ought n't I?" she murmured, so low that only he caught it, if indeed he did.

"If you only knew how happy you make me!" he replied mechanically, too absorbed by the situation to know what he said or what she had said

to him, engrossed by the thought of getting her from under the eyes of the group within the room. With a last murmured word of farewell or promise to meet them later, he drew her with him to the corridor beyond.

Graeham broke the tension with a quick laugh as they disappeared.

"I think she went Clark one better, eh, Carlysle?"

"They have met before," said Miss Caruth musingly; "I wonder where?"

"How well Peter did his part!" sighed Mrs. Carlysle. "He is *so* satisfactory!"

"How well she did hers!" corrected Carlysle, with a light of genuine admiration in his eyes. "If there is one thing 'in man or woman, dear my lord,' that I do revere, it is grit!"

Clark and his companion meanwhile walked the full length of the corridor in silence: Clark, conscious of the eyes that followed the beautiful woman on his arm, was voiceless in the effort he made to control the tumult that shook his nerves; and she, too, was silent, although, as Clark became aware in a sub-conscious way, she did not share his emotion. Her long, elastic step fell evenly with his own, and the hand upon his arm was light and steady. Clark strained it to his heart as he bent over her.

"Blossom, Blossom!" he whispered unsteadily. "At last! At last!" The girl turned her face to him with slow, elaborate grace, letting her eyes just skim

his face with a slight, gracious smile, — the smile of a woman who ignores a boldness, preferring to construe it a blunder. Then —

"My name 's Miss Larkin," she murmured suavely. "Maybe you did n't hear what Mrs. Carlysle said." Then before Clark could catch his breath she went on in Jane's best manner, perfectly rendered: "This promises to be quite a brilliant affair, does it not?"

"Quite," dropped mechanically from Clark's lips. As he looked down upon her, walking calmly at his side, her cheek turned from him in an attitude of graceful ease, profound amazement succeeded by amusement, that was not unmixed with chagrin, sped across Clark's deeper mood, like rack across a storm cloud. His eyes continued to rest upon her averted face, greedily reclaiming each unforgotten charm. The tender outline of her throat that had fitted the curve of his palm; the curl of her self-willed mouth; the arch upward tilt of her nose, — all, all were the same. His eyes softened with a smile, as they rested upon the dusky hair curled low upon her brow and throat. He remembered well how she had hated her beautiful red hair, and how often she had entreated him to let the color be changed.

Just before they reached the stairs they passed the curtained doorway of a deserted reception room, and Clark turned toward it. His companion met his

glance of passionate entreaty with raised brows of perfectly controlled and courteous inquiry, which Clark in his turn endeavored to beat down by a remonstrant frown.

"We can't talk down there, among all those people!" he urged with tender roughness. "Come, darling."

The girl's smile was as graciously unattached as before, as she drawled sweetly: "Aw, yes we ken! Lessen," — archly, — "lessen you air goin' to tell me er secret; 'n' you 'd better not, fur" — here she suddenly made a transition to Jane's manner, that would have amused Clark hugely at any other time — "I could n't keep a secret to save my life, really!"

"You foolish child," said he gravely, after an instant of hard scrutiny; "do you suppose I will be put off with mummery of this sort? Iola!"

She drew her hand coldly from his arm, and glanced him over with conscious dignity.

"I see Mrs. Carlysle just below us there; I will join her," and she sped lightly down the stairs, leaving Clark to join her if he would upon the landing, exasperated and a trifle out of breath as he drew her hand into his arm again.

"We 'll have it out before the evening is over," he said quietly. "You belong to me — for the evening," he ended, with a shadow of his old caressing masterfulness as he looked down into her eyes,

that beat down his own with a cool consciousness of power that startled him.

"I wonder," she observed calmly, as they walked through the anteroom leading to the ballroom, — "I wonder what right you have to speak to me in this way?"

"Right!" he echoed hoarsely, letting go his hold upon himself for a second. Suddenly he laughed, an easy laugh of ownership, — caressing, tolerant. "The gods themselves cannot take back their gifts, Blossom, and no more can a woman! . . . This is a magnificent floor! May I have the pleasure? Have you forgotten how to waltz?" he asked, as she stood a moment in silent struggle. "Ah, I see you have not! I taught you well, did I not? . . . Right?" he went on after a space, gravely, yet with the note that comes to the voice in speaking to a child. "Right, you say? I have the same right I ever had, — the right you gave me, Iola! And — and "— he hesitated, "the other."

"What other?" she asked coldly, though he felt the start that ran through her as he answered, simply,

"The child."

The ball was at its height when Carlysle came to anchor at his wife's side, with a smile of triumph.

"Our little guest from 'She-car-go' is having the time of her life. The men are mad about her, eh?"

"The men!" said she, in a tone of reserved nega-

tion, as she drew Carlysle to a position that commanded the whole ballroom. Within, the long lines of the cotillion were weaving in spirals, melting, forming, dissolving, and reforming into undulating lines, joined by a rainbow arch of gauze; the delicately tinted dresses of the women giving to the whole the aspect of a garden border, with tulips gayly a-blow.

"Peter has been perfectly lovely to her; he has scarcely left her side all the evening, and it takes courage to face that."

She indicated by a play of feature Callie's figure, italicized by the brilliant rose-colored gown, and by a very perceptible space left upon each side of her by the women who stood next her in the line. The girl's head was still held high, and her eyes, beneath their drooping lashes, did not waver from Clark's face as with a low word, a smile, a glance, he guided her among the unfamiliar figures of the dance. Carlysle's laugh had a note of pity as he watched the cruel little comedy, that had its tragic underlining.

"I always thought Peter had a sort of grit, but I never suspected him of that sort of courage. He 's in the deuce of a funk too," he added, watching Clark keenly. Clark's face was set in his society expression of detached nonchalance, that in women's eyes added piquancy to his delicate and unfailing attention to a woman's slightest want: the combination had won

for him the verdict among the women he knew of being the possessor of "a perfectly lovely manner;" but something in the clinch of his jaw, that squared his chin and straightened his lip, betrayed to the watchers without his consciousness of the little play that went on about him, — of skirts swirled deftly aside to avoid contact with the rose-colored gauze, of cheeks turned and glances that passed her blankly, — hands extended unavoidably in the convolution of the dance, but timed exactly to miss Callie's own.

"She 's a beauty, 'for a' that an' a' that'!" observed Carlysle, with a faintly vindictive complaisance, that drew a smile from his wife as she gave a shrug of disgusted acquiescence.

"Of course, that is it. If it were not for her — her" —

"Seductiveness," supplied Carlysle, with the air of having said all there was to say in a word.

"Yes! No woman on earth could be expected to stand Callie's glance, and that smile!" Mrs. Carlysle shivered daintily.

"Do be fair, Kate! The girl can't help her type, you know. That 's nothing but atavism; under that ancestral glaze of hers she 's a perfectly commonplace little earthenware pippin. What offends you is merely a sort of natural fascination, like the play of color in certain birds and fishes."

"We have rather passed the 'play of color' stage,

Jim. And no nice woman would put up with natural fascination in another woman for a moment, as you perfectly know."

"I suppose you know who she is, Kate?" said he quietly, after a moment of silence. Mrs. Carlysle whirled swiftly upon him.

"Iola Jourdan!"—tensely;—"I have felt it for days!" Her eyes passed on, and rested reflectively upon Clark's face. "Can it be possible that he knows?"

"Clark? Oh, yes; he knows—now. Peter met her here two years ago, when he was working the old Chinquepin deal with her father. He stopped a month in the country, near her father's plantation." Carlysle spoke without special significance, but his wife's hand closed with instant comprehension upon his arm, in a nervous grasp of sympathy.

"Oh, Jim, my poor boy, are you to lose Chinquepin at last? After all you have done?"

"Never mind," he said cheerfully, after an instant of silent sympathy with her trouble; "don't worry, Kate; who knows but it may work out right in the end?"

"How can he marry her as things are?"

"I wish to God I knew!" said Carlysle, with his eyes narrowed in thought. "It is a terrific situation for Clark—Peter, of all men! Graeham, now—Graeham has the tough fibre of manliness in him, that would face the world down and force its respect; but

Peter would go to pieces under it. That infernal will of old Jourdan's has blazoned the thing from one end of the country to the other, and it would simply mean to walk into the blaze of the footlights and announce himself a monumental cad; and when a man happens not to be a cad, as Peter is not! '*Ought* to pay'? I wish to heavens there was a chance of his escaping payment — in this particular coin, at least! That idea, Kate, that in a case like this the woman is the only one who pays, is the deadest fallacy of an enlightened age — threadbare, rotten! When you hit the level of the fundamentals, that thing ceases to be a question for society; at that level we are human beings merely, and we settle upon the basis that no human being escapes the consequences of his own acts. This has nothing to do with morality, as you see morality; this is the thing men call honor, and it keeps society's head to the wind! It 's a standard set for men, by men who know themselves and each other and women; and men settle it in their own way, with the man who dares ignore it. What it foots up to in this case is that Clark will brand himself a puppy if, having refused to right this girl, he now marries her under the terms of her father's will, and takes the money old Jourdan offered him as a bribe."

"Who knows that he refused?"

"The presumption is that he did; he did not marry her."

"But she — Callie may not be willing?"

"Women have no choice in a thing like this; they must 'get the world's warrant' or go under."

"No choice, indeed! Have you seen James Goodloe's letter, that came to-night? How on earth, Jim, is this thing to end?"

Carlysle flung responsibility from him, with a shrug of his graceful inconsequent shoulders. His wife went on: —

"He is going abroad on business, and wants to take her with him. He wants her to meet him in New York in two weeks, and marry him before they sail."

"The deuce he does! has Callie seen the letter?" quickly.

"Yes, naturally. She was delighted; agreed to go at once."

"Agreed!"

Carlysle stood in thought, with his eyes upon the brilliant scene within, where the lines were forming for the last time. A long-drawn golden note from the orchestra, and the garden borders seemed flattened by a passing breeze; broke, scattered, and resolved themselves into a great wheel of promenaders, gayly chattering. Callie with Clark passed the open doorway, where Mrs. Carlysle stood. His head was bent low over her; he seemed to plead with her. She nodded carelessly, with eyes that glanced away from him, and the two passed out of sight.

"Clark is what women call 'a fetching fellow,' is n't he, Kate?"

"Peter has a most ex-qui-site manner," said Mrs. Carlysle judicially; "but I 'll leave you to say how far manner counts, when it comes to what you call 'the fundamentals.'"

In the meantime, in a glazed balcony, separated from the ballroom by a screen of palms that converted it into a tiny jungle, lit dimly by the winter moon low in the sky without, Clark and the girl were facing those same "fundamentals."

Clark stared at the bar of moonlight upon the tiles at his feet with moody eyes; the girl leaned easily back in the corner of the low seat they shared. They were silent; but the silence quivered, strained across the raw edge of feeling.

"I know," resumed Clark, with his voice full of rough, unused notes, — "Great God, I've had cause enough to know! — that it is worse than madness to reason with you."

"Yes, I hate it," said she calmly; "let 's talk erbout th' party."

"But it is worse even than madness, to let you wreck your life and mine by this piece of folly. Our relation to each other concerns no one on earth but our two selves and the executor of your father's will; and Mr. Cartright is your uncle, — he will be as anxious as I to keep this quiet. Not three people in the

world need know that we have been married privately. We would be together just as we used to be; think of that, Iola! Together again, and free to live our lives as we please. With this money for the falls, we could live in the East somewhere; and who would ever know what your past had been?"

Iola laughed a low, stinging laugh, that flushed Clark's forehead with a sudden heat.

"*My* past!" she echoed. "You air awful good to overlook my past!" Her bosom was rising and falling in quick pants, torn by the same unendurable shame that had maddened her at Graeham's words: a raging sense of injustice, somewhere, flung her in fierce revolt against her own nature that had betrayed her; and in that one scathing instant of self-knowledge and self-scorn, that implacable "unto the third and fourth generation" fulfilled itself, and in heredity's grip Marthy McGuion's daughter rehearsed, concentrated into one moment of agony, her mother's shame that had rankled for forty years. "He called me er red rose," she said, hurrying her words with gasps of mocking laughter between; "but even *he* did n't 'low I could be bought."

"'Bought'?" echoed Clark coldly. "You would be my wife."

"But er bought wife! Bought with th' name of wife, the same as I 'd buy you with Chinquepin!"

Clark made a gesture of restrained anger. "You do not understand, Iola. You never could understand that a man has a duty to the world, to himself as part of the world. We could have been happy in the old days in the old way, if you'd only have been reasonable." He dropped upon his knee at her side, and tried to draw her to him in his old-time caressing way. "Come back to me, Blossom, and have done with all this talk about the 'past,' like a little tragedy queen! You have n't changed an atom, take my word for it; you are the same adorable, exasperating, natural creature that loved me because she could n't help it, being made for loving! Come; we'll bring the old days back, and we'll have the little chap with us if you say so. What difference does a scrap of printed paper or a dozen careless words from a minister make to us now, — except to secure the property to you and to the boy? Say you will, dear! Let me arrange with Mr. Cartright."

But she thrust him from her and faced him steadily, as unlike the palpitating creature that he had known, as her gaze that studied him coldly told him that he was unlike the lover of those days.

"You used to tell me — do you remember? — over 'n' over, that I did n't understand. I did n't then; but Peter, I do now. Maybe it is n't the bit uv writin' or th' preacher's word that makes th' differ-

ence; but it's — it 's *something* inside uv me, that tells me it is not right to go back to you, no matter how, with th' bit uv writin' or without it, as you say. That girl that lived with you," she went on slowly, as though the thought were beating itself out in her brain stroke by stroke, "has grown up into me, like my little-girl self with a doll grew up into her. She did not know all that she wanted, and she took what she could get, like any child; but *I* know what I want now; I want to be er star like — like *her*."

Peter Clark was an ordinary young fellow, with a rather cheap earthenware soul; but even cheap earthenware needs to be filled, having been moulded in the shape to receive and hold and give, — and having been filled ever so shallowly once, aches emptily when dispossessed; and as he met the girl's face intent upon the thought constraining her, the realization was driven home to him, like a dull nail into his brain, that he had lost her, — and with her the hopes and ambitions, paltry enough no doubt, yet making the sum of life to him. He had loved Iola Jourdan cleanly and honestly, and had been truer to his illicit union with her than many men are to their marriage vows; he loved her now; he had given her in those days all that was in him to give; but courage, the sort of courage that it took to face the frown of his plaster gods and their tinny thunders, was not in him. But the same God that made the

soul of the coward made compromise, and Clark turned to it gratefully. Hoodwink his gods, since he dared not defy them!

"Do you fully understand that you must give up this money forever, unless you comply with the terms of your father's will?"

"Yes."

"And what then, Iola? What future for you and for the child? I find you here, in this preposterous masquerade, the guest of the Carlysles; but for how long?"

He turned away restlessly, measuring the little space with a stride, and back. "I know you too well," he said, looking keenly down on her, "to dream that you will be frank with me; but no woman, not even you, would be so mad — Is there another man?"

"Yes," she breathed.

"You love him enough to sacrifice your fortune for his sake?"

"A thousand times over for one hour as his wife!"

"Does he know?" asked Clark hoarsely.

"Know? What?"

"Of the sacrifice you are making, for one thing, and why you make it."

"Sacrifice, pooh! 'F I had th' whole round world in this hand and heaven in this," — she held out her lovely arms to him with outstretched hands, in an

unconsciously dramatic gesture, — "I 'd give them a million times over fur — fur him."

"But you have not told him," said Clark cruelly; "and when you do" — He paused, his own jealous misery silenced by the agony that looked at him from her eyes. He bent over her in quick repentance. "My poor girl, you were afraid to tell him? Would the brute dare to think — would any man living dare to think an evil thought of you! Was that what you meant about 'stars' and 'roses'?"

She thrust him off, turned from him with hidden face; and Clark stood staring out at the lank, gray fields, crossed by stalking shadows from the sinking moon.

"Iola, give me a chance to right the wrong I did you, dear, in the only way I can! If I could I would undo the past, make it possible — But no; why do I lie? I would not! I know how it will be with you. Destiny has always constrained you, like a curse! You will tell this man, and when you do he will have no more of you; then you *must* come back to me, and why not now?"

Iola shivered, and shrunk from his tone as though he had laid his eager, importunate hands upon her; but she made no other answer.

"You will not?"

"Never!"

"I love you, I tell you!"

"You love Chinquepin," she answered, with a smile too weary to be bitter, and too transient to display the tinge of pique he listened eagerly for.

"I'll prove it, Iola! Let the cursed water go! Come back to me in the old way!"

She walked past him without reply, and he followed her, in silence, to the room beyond.

CHAPTER XII

"Look to the soul —
Pity it, stoop to it before you begin
(The true man's way) on justice."

CARLYSLE met them at the foot of the great stairway, and took firm possession of his guest.

"No bloated monopolists about here, Peter," he said lightly, but with a keen glance at the young man's face; "I like to waltz with the belle of the evening myself, occasionally. Mrs. Carlysle has just gone up," he went on, addressing Iola, "and installed me as chaperone. Shall I take you up to her? Or will you give me a turn, to remember the evening by? Or let me get you something? Not an ice? — a glass of wine?"

"Thank you, no," she returned wearily and a little flatly; and after a pair of words of coldest formality had passed between her and Clark, she turned with Carlysle toward the stairs.

"You 're sure you won't think better of the glass of wine? Your triumph has been a bit too much for you, eh?"

He flushed a little under the sidelong, mocking glance she turned upon him.

"You need n't do any more play-actin', Mr. Car-

lysle! I have never tasted a drop of wine in my life, nor worn a decent dress, nor walked with a gentleman as I am walking with you, and you know it perfectly."

"Except what my eyes tell me of your beauty and grace, child," hesitated Carlysle, "I know so little of you. But I wish very much that it were more — that I was better able to help you, advise you; for something tells me that you need it sorely."

He laid his hand upon an open door that they were passing at the moment.

"Will you not come in, — it is not late, and my study is just here? I wish to talk over Goodloe's letter with you; and I think you have something to tell me, have you not?" — he paused on the last word and stood looking keenly down into her face — "Iola?" he added deliberately.

He felt the start that ran through her, and his admiration rose as he perceived that she would not waste herself in useless artifice. In the veins that fed her delicate flesh ran a tiny runlet from the great stream of stubborn courage, that for four years, against overwhelming odds, amazed the world; and it steadied her now, and stiffened her to meet the ordeal before her. She was a shade paler than before, but her liquid drawl was perfectly steady, as she replied, —

"You know already all I have to tell."

It took Carlysle a moment to raise the light upon

his desk and find her a chair; he began to speak in a slightly peremptory tone, while still busied with the light.

"You told me when I first met you here, at my office, that you were from Chicago. That is not true, is it?"

"It was partly true," she said carelessly.

"Were you not born and raised on your father's plantation in Pike County, down the river here?"

She had been leaning back in her chair, with her eyes upon one slippered foot protruding from her flounces, and she did not rouse herself to answer except to lift her lovely impenetrable eyes to his.

"You told me when I first met you," she began, unconsciously using Carlysle's own phrase, "that you would n't never ax me no questions. 'N' when er gentleman gives er lady his honor-word, he is bound to keep it."

"It was an implied promise, certainly. But, if you remember, I added that my only concern with you was to help you, and that is still true. If, to help you more effectively, I should be forced to disregard one part of my promise to more fully keep the other, I think I should be justified, eh?"

No answer; and after a pause Carlysle went on.

"We'll let that pass. Your father has left you some very valuable property, Iola, under certain conditions. Shall I explain it to you? That is really what I wanted to speak to you about."

"I know erbout Chinquepin 'n' th' other," she said quietly.

"Is it possible that you knew already? And you gave no sign — made no move to claim it?"

"I shall never claim it that way."

"Not claim it!" cried Carlysle, shaken out of his composure by the finality of her tone. "Preposterous! Why, this is the chance of your life, child. You are too brave to let it slip from your grasp. With this money and your beauty — But you will learn rapidly enough what the world has for a woman like you. Let me give you your first lesson to-night; and remember what I say, it will be of value to you. The past is a dead thing, Iola; dead life cells that we slough off, as a snake does his outworn skin, that we may clothe ourselves anew in strength and beauty. In a measure you know this, — for you have proved it! That past experience, that little" — he wavered kindly — "shadow on your life, will pass from the minds of others; let it pass from your own as well. Take another grip on life, and let the past go hang! Take this money your father left you, and set yourself right with the world, as he intended."

"'Set m'self right with th' world,'" she echoed slowly; "ever'body keeps on saying that to me. Pa said it that night when I went back; 'n' *he* said it over 'n' over; and now you! What does it mean, Mr. Carlysle, to be right with th' world?"

"I don't know that I know," Carlysle said mus-

ingly; "but you know you have been at odds with the world, and what put you there?"

The half-dozen people who constituted the girl's little world had, with the exception perhaps of Carlysle, tacitly accepted her at her own valuation; never suspecting that the callous lightness so obstinately interposed between herself and the world might be a shield, snatched up at random in some moment of stress and clung to afterward, behind which she cowered bruised and shrinking in fierce isolation: but the revelation that shone from her eyes, black beneath her locked brows, and spoke in her trembling lips, that could not frame the words that strove for utterance, drove home to Carlysle a stinging sense of his injustice to her. She had sprung up and paced the floor with her long, light step, that had the freedom of the country-bred girl, the shiver of the silk keeping pace with her as she walked; a coil of her hair had slipped down and lay along her bosom, and she threaded it with shaking fingers as she paused before Carlysle.

"You know th' plantation folkses erlong th' ruver here, Mr. Carlysle? Well, I was like that; er little cracker in blue-cotton checks 'n' brogan shoes, 'n' what did I know erbout being right with th' world, or wrong with it? *He* was all th' world I knew or kered erbout. But you see, *he* kered erbout his 'world,' as he called it, more 'n he did erbout me, and bime by he let me find it out, 'n' then"—

"You left him?"

"Yes."

"And — ?"

"You know th' rest," she said wearily. "I come back home to pa, 'n' he told me to set myself right with th' world before I ever come nigh to him, 'n' I did n't know where to go; 'n' I had n't any more money if I had known; so I stopped here, 'n' you were good to me — I don't know why; 'n' that 's all," she ended, "except Mr. Goodloe."

"Goodloe!" cried Carlysle, with a start. "Do you mean that man in Nevada? He will not hold you to that insane agreement, in the face of this other thing; I will not let him. That 's what I wanted to talk over with you. We 'll put a stop to that at once."

She had turned a proudly questioning glance upon him, in silent challenge of his right to do what he had said.

"Think what this means to you!" Carlysle answered the quiet resistance of her glance, too much in earnest to choose his words; "fortune, respectability, your child's good name."

"Respectability?" she echoed, not so much in scorn as in restless questioning, as of a thing brooded over in the seclusion of her own mind now brought suddenly into the light of another's explanation; "'f it was not right to stay with *him* when we loved each other, — thought we loved each other, anyhow,

— is it right to go back to him when we no longer love each other, for a bit uv money?"

Carlysle moved restlessly. "You do not consider the moral question involved," he said hurriedly, — "your duty to your child, — to society."

"*I!* Duty to society? What has society done for me?"

"— Marriage, I mean the legal tie," went on Carlysle, not heeding her question, "is right, even under those circumstances, because it is order, law! You asked what it meant to be right with the world? That is what it means, — to get in line with the orderly course of things; to get one's self parallel with the great silent body of *right;* and legal marriage is a part of that. I may seem inconsistent about this matter with Goodloe, but I cannot stand by and see you cut your throat in this way. I blame myself bitterly enough for my stupid meddling with your affairs, but it is not too late. A tie like that between you and this man," he went on, feeling his way as a surgeon might with his hand along a broken limb, dreading the pain he must inflict, "is not easily broken. Forgive him for the child's sake; obey your father's command from his grave, for it is nothing short of that! Let his repentance — that is what he intended — be effective in righting your life."

"I did n't 'low it was easy to break," she said slowly; "but when they air broke, they stay broke,

— they ain't no mendin' them. I could n't go back to — him. Not now, knowing what I know."

"Iola, a woman would look as you look and act as you are acting if there was another man. Is there?"

An indescribable change passed over her face, deepening it to tenderness so magically that Carlysle fairly caught his breath. It was the first quickening of the spirit he had ever detected in their unchanging depths, and he perceived it now with consternation; the sudden springing into being of a force he could not control. All that he had predicated of her capacity for passion, in the early days of his acquaintance with her, rushed now upon his mind in a qualm of divination.

"Not Goodloe!"

She did not answer, except to press her hands upon her heart, as though to shield its throbbing from his eyes; and he added slowly, —

"God help you, child!"

"Why?" she demanded proudly, though a frightened shadow had fallen across the radiance of her eyes. "He has asked me to marry him at once; urged it!"

"Because he does not love you," said Carlysle tersely.

"How can you know? What right have you to say?"

He brushed her protest aside with kindly peremptoriness.

"I do know; no matter how. I know that he loves another woman."

"What other?" breathlessly.

"One whose name shall not be brought into this discussion; but you know whom I mean."

She did not shiver or shrink under his words; but with the instinct that wild animals have she seemed slowly to be turning to stone, hiding herself from him by a sort of self-effacement that feigned emotional death. Carlysle went on in troubled argument, which she seemed scarce to hear.

"When I proposed this plan to you, it was a desperate remedy for what seemed to me — would have seemed to any man — a desperate case. Goodloe might have been the vilest brute unhung, and as it is you are taking a frightful risk."

"I can make him love me! When we are married" —

"It may never come to marriage." Carlysle interrupted her gently, conscious meantime of an undercurrent of thought, that wondered what stuff James Goodloe could be made of, that could resist the woman who stood before him proudly asserting her ability to win him. "Have you considered what Goodloe's attitude may be to a certain fact — I mean, after a certain disclosure has been made to him, that in honor cannot now be delayed? He must know the circumstances of your past life before he marries you; and in that case he may, and justifi-

ably, refuse to fulfill his agreement — Heavens, child, do not look at me like that!" He turned from her, and stood looking into the fire, with bent head, for a space.

"If I had ever dreamed of this thing turning into what it has upon my hands! It seemed a perfectly simple thing, done every day. In many of its phases marriage is a civil contract; no more, no less; plain business! How the deuce could I know I was tangling myself up with a bunch of naked souls? Held up, by Jove, to solve a problem the devil himself could n't straighten out. I will have no more to do with it" — Carlysle flung the situation from him with a gesture of intolerable annoyance, only to break out a moment later, as, with his hands behind him, he paced his study floor.

"*I* am exactly where I was, squarely upon my original position. Is it my fault that conditions have slued round? When I advised concealing — er, ignoring, I should say — facts in your past, and arranged things that you might be — er — unincumbered, I neither contemplated the possibility of your becoming romantically attached to this man — a mere convenience, as I saw it! — nor any of this intricate complication about the inheritance of this money. Do you mean seriously to chuck up all this property, for the sake of a man you 've never seen?"

"Yes!" she breathed.

"But have you thought this thing out? How, for instance, do you propose to conceal your identity with Iola Jourdan? If it were put to Goodloe," — he suddenly swung round upon her, intently alert, — "I believe he would refuse to let you sacrifice your property! He would if he has a spark of manliness in him."

"Never!" cried Iola, with an imperiousness that startled Carlysle. "I have your positive promise, Mr. Carlysle, made in Miss Caruth's presence, that my identity should never be disclosed to this man, unless he demanded it of you or of me. He has not done so; and until he does, I hold you to your promise that he shall know me *only* as Mary Meadows."

Their eyes met in a brief trial of strength, each striving to beat down the other's guard, to penetrate the other's motive, to shake the other's resolve.

"I shall not allow you to deceive this man," said Carlysle firmly. "Rather than you should do so, I will take matters into my own hands and tell him"—

"Tell him what?"

"What he must know of Mary Meadows's past before he marries her."

"Of *Mary Meadows's* past? You swear that you will mention no other name? Neither Callie Larkin, nor Iola Jourdan, nor Miss Jane Caruth?"

Carlysle shuddered with unconcealed repugnance.

"Certainly not Miss Caruth's! Her name is not to be connected with this er — this matter, in any

degree. Her part in it is done, and I shall at once break off her connection with the letters. I shall write this last one myself. And if you insist," — with a shrug, — "the other names shall be withheld as well."

"I forgot," said Iola, with deadly bitterness, "that stars must not be mixed up with roses!"

"What do you mean?"

"Not nothin'."

She stood, still threading the heavy lock through her fingers as she thought.

"Will you swear, Mr. Carlysle, that when you tell Mr. Goodloe of — of my past, you will speak of me as Mary Meadows and name no other name?"

"Yes," said he reluctantly; "I will keep the word I gave you." He offered her his hand as he spoke, adding impetuously: "Upon my soul, Iola, I believe it is better for you in the end to have this thing told! In the sort of marriage I proposed for you first, reservations are fair enough; but love — and you love this fellow enough to sacrifice your fortune for him, it seems! — love is different. In a marriage of love, your soul and spirit, as well as your past that has gone into the making of that soul and spirit, belong equally to this man and his to you. If you give him love, take it from him; life with him would be hell with this thing between you. Good-night."

CHAPTER XIII

"The secret lay on lip at brink
Of speech, in one fierce tremble to escape."

Iola walked along the corridor in the direction of her own room, each step seeming to plunge her deeper into a fog of wretchedness, that had the vague torture of a nightmare and something, too, of a nightmare's poignant inevitableness.

This was in part nervous reaction from the excitement of the earlier part of the evening, when the intoxicating consciousness of her beauty had strung her to a buoyant defiance of the difficulties closing in upon her.

In the presence of that brilliant vision of herself in Graeham's mirror, she had cast care from her. That woman had only to demand of life to find its gifts at her feet!

The scene with Graeham had found her upon the crest of this wave of triumph, and whirled her through "both the infinitudes of love and hate" in a moment, and left her staring blankly at the curtain rung down between her and the stage, upon which she had been in the act of stepping. This moment had been the psychological crux of the girl's nature, when the spiritual forces within her had gathered the

tides of her being to themselves, leaving passion's old demesne bare; and it had been followed in turn by the struggle with Clark, when she had fallen from the full height to which the new-born forces within her had raised her, in the moment when she had seen herself with the eyes of the women who had refused to recognize her in the dance. In the moments when she could shake herself free of feeling and think, she knew that they did not — could not — know aught of her story; yet they had marked her out by a thousand unmistakable evidences of avoidance. Her woman's instinct had divined that jealousy of her beauty might account for this, and natural resentment at having one of the hotel domestics present among them as a guest might also play a part. But there had been something deeper yet, something she had seen before; seen over and over, spite of their care, in both Mrs. Carlysle and Miss Caruth: a shrinking from her, a distrust of something in her which they perceived and of which she was herself ignorant, reflected back upon her from their unconscious attitudes. Had it left some stain upon her, then, — that past? Does sin mark a woman? — Sin? Her mind went back to her life with Peter Clark, its narrow simplicity, its little daily tale of simple cares and pleasures; for even Clark's wild oats had been neatly fenced in by his smug conservatism — with wonder. Had that been sin? Her mind sped on to the time when know-

ledge had begun to grow upon her, dimming her happiness with him like breath upon a pane, until life became one aching bruise of suspicion that he saw her, had seen her all along, as she was beginning to see herself in the light of her awakening consciousness. Or, was the sin that she no longer cared, as Carlysle said; that she could sleep now at night, and not lie awake and weep for the man from whom she had fled?

Iola raised her hands, and pushed back her heavy hair restlessly as she walked. Do what she would, she could not shake off the impression of that struggle with Clark. His very presence seemed to have plunged her — steeped her! — in the past, from which she thought she had purged herself. She longed again for the numbness of the months when she had first known Carlysle and his wife; her heart had been deaf and dumb and blind in those days, and she herself like an empty shell, swept dry and clean of passion. Those were the days when they had begun to weave her a future. She had not cared, because she could not feel; she had only longed, like a homesick child shut out into the night, for the life she saw about her, — for the sheltered, bright, reposeful life, made silken soft by love and deference, that Mrs. Carlysle and Miss Caruth accepted as a matter of course. It was — though the girl had no understanding of it — the instinctive craving of a nature brought for the first time within its hereditary environment. In the

glimpses that she caught of Miss Caruth's life, she had marked with eager envy the attitude of the men about her, contrasting it with what life had shown her of men; and as the months wore on, and the meaning of it worked into her mind, it became a source of burning unrest to her, that was one of jealousy's most subtle forms of torture. The expression of Graeham's eyes when he looked at Miss Caruth, the bend of his head over her as they walked together, the wooing notes that would come into his voice (that he tried to subdue in speaking to Jane), had been a galling revelation to Iola, who knew so well the blatant signs of passion, that had not been thus sedulously hidden from her eyes. She asked herself in jealous misery why, and had found the answer in her past, — from which these people, while they had held out their hands to her in help, had none the less turned away their eyes.

She had agreed to the plan suggested to her by Carlysle in sheer indifference, the atrophy of the emotional part of her seeming to have withered will and hope alike; and later, with the instinct of a creature that had always clung, she had clung to it as a plank in the waste of waters.

Then had come to her the startling secret revelation of Graeham as Goodloe, bringing with it the realization of all that she had grown so ardently to desire. At the beginning, love for Graeham as a man had not consciously constrained her so much as

cupidity; he was the bread with which to satisfy this new, strange hunger, that had awakened in her like a fierce little beast with claws. In those early days he had been but a means to an end; he opened the way to the dainty luxury, the refinements, the pleasures of the life she saw about her. As she had told Graeham long before, it was not money that she wanted; it was merely that her nature demanded — inarticulately enough, but none the less insistently — its proper environment. But with the expanding of the deeper side of her, under the influences about her, had come, inevitably, deeper needs. Across the instincts of a sensuous and passionate nature, inherited from a long line of spoiled and imperious women, were cast the wavering shadows of her newly awakened spiritual life. Graeham became a spiritual need. He meant moral cleanness and spiritual peace; her need for him was doubly imperative; to be his wife absolved her in her own thoughts from taint of her past, and lifted her at once to warm security, in a world lined and padded soft with luxury, — a world that every hidden force of heredity at work within her told her was her own, of which she had someway been despoiled.

The scar where her life had been torn from Clark's had healed; and the currents of her being, quickened by the impetus of the life about her, set to Graeham in a freshet of passionate love, that the untarnished freshness of the man's own vigorous nature

did nothing to check as she grew to know him better. A tactful use of her semi-domestic position in the house easily created for her endless opportunities of meeting him; and secure in her knowledge of the secret bond between them, as well as in his admiration (which he did not attempt to conceal from her), and absolutely confident in her own power to deepen it into love when fate should elect a meeting between them, the girl had let herself go to the full length of her nature.

She had divined Miss Caruth's attraction for him almost before Graeham was himself conscious of it; but, involved in the coil of her miserable secret, and distrusting frankness, as all super-subtle natures do, she had depended upon deepening her hold upon him surreptitiously against the day of their final disclosure each to the other, writhing meantime under Graeham's half-caressing, half-rallying, never serious attitude, which accepted her, as she knew with inward trepidation, at the value she had set upon herself. And though she dreaded the day of reckoning that must inevitably come, unable to loose even this frail hold upon him.

But through all the miserable uncertainties of her position her hope had been in Carlysle, that he would in the end steer her safely through the chances of disaster to the card-house of her hopes, and with his high-handed assumption of moral responsibility for other people, — for in a certain way the girl under-

stood Carlysle, — insist upon the consummation of the marriage; and his incomprehensible change of front at the last minute had dazed her. His meretricious concern for her good name and his own honor, with which he had covered his determination to disclose her past to Goodloe, and, for some reason which she could not yet grasp, break her engagement with him, had been the parting of the last strand in her last cable of hope.

As she neared the end of Carlysle's suite, a door at her side opened, and Miss Caruth, like a slim crescent moon, dimly seen in white with hanging hair, called her softly. Iola hesitated, partly from weariness, but more because the note of joyousness, always an undertone of Jane's voice, to-night jarred unbearably upon her mood of tense misery. But after a moment spent in vain struggle to invent an excuse, she yielded, and let Miss Caruth draw her within.

"I was listening for you," said Jane. "Sit here on the bed. I could n't sleep until I knew."

"Knew what?" Iola's voice was flatly unresponsive, and Miss Caruth was conscious of a slight recoil.

"Of course I knew you were with Mr. Carlysle, and what you were discussing. Are you — Oh, Callie, what are we to tell Mr. Goodloe?"

"Mr. Carlysle will tell him ever'thing," said she quietly, with a long look into the other girl's eyes.

Miss Caruth was silent; her lip was caught under her teeth in a quick gasp of fear, and her eyes, full of gentle concern, were fixed upon Iola's face with half-shy sympathy. The two girls had been closely drawn together, and had had deep insight into each other's natures, since the correspondence with James Goodloe had begun. But the contact had not made them friends. There had been upon Jane's part an inexplicable shrinking, and upon Iola's a proud consciousness of the other's recoil, and a more determined withdrawal; though upon the surface they had met without friction, — with a gentle forbearance, indeed, from Miss Caruth, that was torture thrice refined to Iola. Miss Caruth put her arm gently about her unresponsive figure now and drew her closer, so that the two stood enveloped in the veil of her hair.

"I am sure it is best, Callie," she said softly; "James Goodloe is the sort of man to compel honesty, — he gives so freely of himself. And something tells me that it will all come right in the end. Don't worry, you poor child."

Iola did not reply; her supple form in the lace and gauze yielded to the other's arm, with the soft coldness of snow.

"There is something in the man himself that makes me know you have taken the right course," went on Jane. "Jem Goodloe," — she broke off with a note of laughter, to cover the other's strained

quiet. "You don't mind my calling him 'Jem,' do you, Callie? He 's nearly as much my lover as he is yours, you know! He is so true and frank and manly that he will be sure to understand; he is just the sort of man to forgive a woman — anything! And I know," — Jane faltered a bit as she strove to impart a sweet naturalness to the talk, spite of the scarce veiled bitterness of the other girl's silence, — "I know he never will be able to resist Claude! Nobody on earth could stand out against that darling baby!"

No answer still, unless the unquiet heaving of the bosom under the rose-colored gauze was answer. Jane tried gently to draw Iola to a seat beside her.

"Sit here, Callie, and let us talk it over. No? Poor child, it will help — it will ease the strain, if no more, to tell it to some one. I know Mr. Carlysle is kind; but he is a man, and I am a girl like yourself. I can try to understand."

Iola freed herself restlessly and walked slowly about the room, drawing off her gloves. She stopped at the foot of the bed and stood leaning with clinched hands upon the rail; her form in the brilliant draperies suggesting a quick tongue of flame, as she swayed forward to look down into Jane's face, who sat withdrawn into the shadows about the bed, the hanging laces of her nightdress and her unbound hair giving her a spirit-like indefiniteness of outline, opposed to the other's vivid figure.

"'F I ax you somethin', will you tell me?"

"I?" hesitated Miss Caruth, appalled by the quivering intensity of the appeal, that was like an importunate hand laid upon her; "I am only a girl like you, yourself; I may not know, but if I know I will tell you."

"I never could do play-actin'," began Iola, in a voice that had it been less purely musical must have been harsh, it was so dry and level, "'n' talk erbout myself like I was two folkses. But — but I wanter know. I'm bound to know!" She paused abruptly; and when she spoke again, it was in a hard, shamed voice. "Did you ever hear tell erbout two kinds er women; one sort that men call roses, and the other sort stars?"

A flush rose in Jane's cheek, and for a moment she covered her face with her hands.

"Yes," she said gravely, her eyes shrinking from the lovely form before her. "I — of course I know what you mean, but no man has ever spoken of such things in my presence."

After an instant, in which Iola remembered that Graeham had not hesitated to point his cruel speech to her, with the words that clung like a festering thorn in her mind; and another, to beat down the shame of the discovery that he should not have so spoken, — would not have so spoken to Miss Caruth, — she went on, making clumsy use of the figure that Graeham's words seemed to have branded upon her mind.

"'F there was er woman that ever'body took to be er rose, but 'f th' woman knew in her soul that she was er star — that it was on'y somethin' that she couldn't help, 'n' hated, oh, hated worse then anythin', that made folkses think so, could she," — she paused to wet her dry lips to force her trembling voice on, — "could she ever get to be er star — like *you?*"

Miss Caruth's hands were clasped about her knees, and she held her solemn eyes unfalteringly upon the white face of the woman bending over her.

"Why did she want to be a star?" she whispered. "Was it for — for some one else's sake? Was it — oh, Callie, was it for — James Goodloe's sake?"

"Yes, for his sake."

"Then, yes! Yes! She could be a star for him, if — if she loved him enough."

Jane was trembling nervously and her eyes were wet with tears, as she slipped down the bed and kneeled beside Iola.

"Oh, Callie, you poor, poor girl! Why have you never let us know? Let us help you to be your 'star-self'? I understand now. That was why you gave up the money and — and the other man? You could not be your better self, your star-self, as his wife! You were right, oh, so right! and we have been wrong. But we did not know, you see, and you did not tell us. I see; with James Goodloe you can be your purer, better self. Yes! There is something

in him that demands it. I have felt it myself in his letters. I"— She paused shyly, but went on more firmly after a moment: "I know a man of that sort, — one of those blundering fellows; yet all the time one knows that — that he will have the divine in love or nothing. It is the 'odor of the skies' for him always." She dreamed a moment, with tender eyes looking into the dusk of the room, unconscious of the burning gaze that the other girl fixed upon her rapt face. "Listen, Iola," she suddenly resumed with tense earnestness. "Whatever comes to you, cling to James Goodloe! Hold to him, as you would to a hand reached downward to you from the skies!"

"Air you in earnest?" demanded Iola, the words stammering on her tongue. "You — you won't never stand in my way? You swear it?"

"I? I stand in your way, poor girl! What frantic nonsense you are talking! This thing you call the 'star' part of you is the thing we all are striving for, I as well as you; it is what is purest and strongest in us: strive for it, Callie; fight for it if you have to; but never, never let it go."

"Will you swear not to come between us?"

Iola's face was perfectly colorless; and her eyes, unwaveringly upon Miss Caruth's, burned with a deep flame, like the blue of molten metal.

"You are nervous and overwrought, Callie, or you would not have such fancies. But — yes; if it will

make you happier, I will swear, as solemnly as ever you like, that I will never take James Goodloe from you."

The hands in Carlysle's study had made the circuit twice and were edging round to three before he laid aside his pen, and, with the frown of absorption still upon his brow, blotted his signature to the last sheet, with a mechanical accuracy that betrayed hard concentration. He threw himself back in his chair at last, plainly with the determination to apply the test of the conservative second thought to the letter he had just finished.

It was addressed to James H. Goodloe, and began without preamble : —

"Six months ago I ran into a set of circumstances, — or they collided with me — I can't say which, though I am willing to shoulder the initiative, — that I presumed to think I could adjust to the advantage of one, possibly of both parties, with whom those circumstances were most vitally concerned."

Carlysle ran his eye hurriedly over the couple of sheets following, which contained a succinct account of the beginning of the correspondence with Goodloe, set forth with unvarnished frankness, that left nothing concealed, except the single fact of Miss Caruth's agency in writing the letters. No faintest reference had been made to her in the letter; and having assured himself with jealous care that the

elision was complete and consistent throughout, Carlysle drew a sigh of relief, and passed on to the next sheet, which began: —

"The affair has now reached a point where, in common honor between men, it is my duty to put you in possession of certain facts in Mary Meadows's past life; and having done so, I leave the outcome to you."

Two lines further down he read: —

"The young lady is a member of my own household; I regard her as a man would a loved and deeply regretted young sister, and I acknowledge the gravest responsibility for her future. I do this duty demanded of me by my conscience, believing that I am acting for her ultimate happiness and good."

A dozen terse lines followed, in which the fact that dominated Mary Meadows's brief past was told with unshaded meaning. The naked fact, without blame as without extenuation, was left with Goodloe, and the writer took up his subject further along: —

"Whatever your personal attitude to a situation of this sort may be, there is in most men a reserve of judgment, based upon their knowledge of the demands that life makes alike upon men and women, that in its working more nearly approximates justice to the woman in such cases than any other judgment known to me; and it is to this quality in you, Goodloe, that I appeal for this girl against

her past. I dare say we should not, as men, vary appreciably in the essentials that make for purity in a woman; and I swear to you from the bottom of my soul that I believe Mary Meadows to be a pure woman, despite the fact that her child was born outside the pale of statutory law."

"My inner imperative," he resumed toward the last page of the letter, "thus far, has been justice to you; I have placed the facts with you; the result must be a transaction between your conscience and you. What further I shall say here is said in the woman's interest, and is dictated by my earnest desire to secure her happiness, regardless of the seeming inconsistencies of my own position in saying it."

The following page or two had given Carlysle a bad half-hour; it had been hard writing,—each word weighed to express the nethermost shade of meaning, and yet leave the infinitesimal chink for retreat. It had been clever juggling; self-interest and policy, inclination and duty, kept deftly spinning, until the eye of conscience failed to distinguish between them. To keep the letter of a promise and violate the spirit is not plain sailing, when it comes to black and white, and the primary meaning of English words.

The furrow in Carlysle's forehead deepened as he read; he lifted his handkerchief delicately to his brow, where drops of sweat were beaded.

"Mary Meadows takes a woman's view of the matter, the view of a woman with a naturally innocent and unworldly mind; she conceives herself bound in honor to fill her engagement with you, in spite of the fact that she loves another man. She is willing to marry you, should you demand it; though to do so will be to sacrifice her heart, which this man holds, and, to be frank, a prospect that in a worldly way is exceedingly advantageous.

"Except for this contingency, it is possible that her happiest destiny might have been as your wife; but we are dealing with brutal facts, my dear Goodloe, and the plain truth is that there is another man, and that Mary Meadows loves him, and he loves her and is anxious to make her his wife. He is, as I have hinted above, a man of great wealth; and he would lift her at once into a sphere where her beauty and social talents would easily secure her prestige,—the position to which she was undoubtedly born, for Mary Meadows is a woman of good blood and family.

"I deplore this state of things very earnestly, but I appeal to your manhood to prevent the sacrifice of this woman's life to a vicarious pledge.

"You and I both know that when the last word shall have been said for expediency, love is the only life for a woman. Enough has passed between the young lady and the man I mention, to assure me that I make no mistake in thinking that a close and

tender bond exists between them; and I put it to you, for the sake of the girl's happiness, to quietly let this thing drop, without exposure for her.

"I must appear to you an unmitigated ass — none the less egregious because crassly well-meaning! My hope is that the future may justify me in your eyes."

"That ought to fetch him, if he's the fellow I take him for, — and leave Peter a clear track," murmured Carlysle. "Jove, it was hard work steering round those snags of conscience! It takes a more robust moral constitution than mine to set a lie down in black and white. That cursed water power!"

He rose with a moody sigh, that melted characteristically into a laugh.

"What between Jane's little flounces, that must be kept out of the puddle at all costs, and Mary Meadows — the blamed little simpleton! and Callie — Jove, how she looked me through to-night! and now, Iola! — I am as pestered with women as if I was a gay philanderer, instead of a perfectly respectable married man doing a bit of financiering!"

CHAPTER XIV

". . . The pain
Of finite hearts that yearn."

THE gray end of a spring evening was soaking the brave new green from the fields and sponging the sunset colors from the river, with folds of twilight trailing from a dun sky.

A bleak wind was abroad on the flat stretches of the river lands, hustling the rash young foliage like a shrewish housewife; cuffing the fluffy willow catkins, and bending the lush canes along the river-bank; browbeating the sturdy thickets of young cottonwoods, until they wrung their hands in panic and turned the pale undersides of their leaves to heaven, in fluttering protest that it was close on April, and time for cottonwoods to be on hand.

The window in Miss Caruth's sitting-room looked across the fields, and from the settle in the embrasure she surveyed the wan landscape, with eyes that seemed to have ravished the afterglow from fields and river and turned it inward to her own heart, to shine in still radiance from her dreaming eyes.

The room at her back was lighted only by a wood fire and the borrowed sunlight of masses of daffodils loading the tables. Miss Caruth was gowned in pale

yellow, to accent the color scheme of the room, or it may have been to recall a memory: this latter possibly, for she touched the yellow primroses that she wore with an absent caress, and a smile as elusive and sweet as their delicate perfume; pressing them closer to her, as though they were in the secret of the quick throbbing of her heart that made them tremble, and her hurried breath that quivered in a long sigh through closed lips, as the door opened and Graeham crossed the room toward her.

They met with the air of having been but briefly parted: neither spoke; Miss Caruth gave him her hands, and he raised them to his lips, kissed them gravely, and stood holding them against his breast, looking down upon her in unsmiling silence.

"Does it seem any more real, Jane?"

"A little more, perhaps. But I am not yet sure that I shall not wake presently, and hear Jim wondering where 'Graeham can have got himself.' Those first days before we had your cable, he said it over and over." Jane paused, with a soft intake of her breath that was a history of the days she mentioned, before she went on, with rather tremulous lightness: "You can't think what it's like when you are not here!"

"I know what it is like everywhere where you are not," replied Graeham, with a controlled gentleness that was almost hard. "Forget those weeks, won't you? What do they count against a lifetime spent

together? Let us date life from this hour, and blot out all that went before. Shall we, Jane?"

"Oh," breathed Jane, and again her lightness was a trifle forced, "blot out our first ride together?"

"No, not that; I did not mean that."

"And our talk in the hut by the river that day, when you called me your ideal? I could not!"

Graeham moved restlessly. "We do not need ideals now," he said unsteadily; "we have the real thing, you know."

"And our footprints in the snow, side by side," — dreamily, — "do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember. Not that, either."

"Tell me just what you want to blot out, dear."

"Nothing," — hurriedly. "This hour here together is so perfect — if we could key our life to come to its note! It was some such thought that I was reaching for, I dare say. Let it go. What else could I have meant?"

"There is nothing lacking in the perfectness of this hour, is there?" Jane pursued dreamily, yet with an underlying purpose that Graeham divined. They were still standing together, and as she spoke Jane leaned lightly against Graeham, looking upward for his answer; and after an instant of hesitation that betrayed a trace of effort, he bent his head and laid his cheek against her hair.

"Nothing," he said, in reply to her question, striving to keep down the harsh note that once

or twice had broken through the restraint of his voice.

"Why should it not always be so perfect, — our whole life together?"

"Ah, why indeed, when we have each other!" His voice rang strong and steady this time, warmed by a touch of lightness as he went on: "You have on the yellow gown, and primroses in your hair. That 's a part of the 'perfectness,' is it?"

"You remember! Yes; I put the gown on purposely."

"So like a woman to hit a man when he 's down!"

"It's odd," said the girl, after a pause, breaking the silence that had fallen between them. These silences that Graeham made no effort to break made Jane restless; she seemed each time to have to work her way through them, stone by stone, back to him. "It 's odd we don't want to talk, is n't it? In books newly engaged people seem to spend their entire time sitting upon the sofa, hand in hand, unfolding their past to each other."

"That 's to make the fellow's plot go — the fellow writing the book, you know. In real life it 's the other way round."

"Who makes the plot go in life?" asked she idly, to beat back the silence that threatened to win him from her again.

"The devil," said Graeham, so calmly as to

deprive the word of profanity; as he said it, it was a simple, stern affirmation. "What men called fate, you know, when men believed in fate. Come," — he met Jane's remonstrant eyes with a smile, as he drew her to the piano; — "I've thought of something that may make our hour a bit more perfect. Music, you know. Play for me, and let me sit beside you here, not thinking or feeling; just dreaming — yes, dreaming of the ideal!"

Jane played an absent prelude, with her eyes, under sidelong lashes, on Graeham's face, — in shadow except where the light from the piano lamp touched his mouth and chin.

Graeham had the mobile, emotional lips of a poet; the passionate, impetuous, naïvely earnest mouth of the man to whom ideals have the significance of actualities. Men of this sort follow their ideals, with every whit the same keenness and energy that they put into the pursuit of the material: they bend every force in them to their attainment, with precisely the same directness that they go about their business in life; and strangely enough, never perceive the unreality of them, until their outstretched hands close on nothingness. They suffer — such men — a thousand-fold more in losing them than the man of subtler mind, who from an intellectual viewpoint perceives the ideal to be a beautiful and necessary corollary to the scheme of life, — a safety valve for man's spiritual nature, an equivalent for the *n*th power of

divine law. These men, laying life back fold on fold to its core, say calmly,—

"Here's law; where's God?"

But to Graeham's sort, the ideal is as real as the material,—it is bone of their bone; and the shock of parting with it jars the very centre of the man's being.

Miss Caruth's eyes brooded upon his unconscious face, lingering upon the lines of suffering about his mouth, newly come there. What was it—something added or something lost since she had seen him—that made the difference? Was the unveiled face of his love less tender than she had dreamed it, veiled? Less strong? No, no. Had its exquisite reverence lost by a shade, in possession? His glance, his touch, had scarce claimed her; or was it—

Graeham looked up and met her musing eyes with a smile, and she swayed toward him unconsciously, as a flame might be sucked outward by a draft.

"That frantic rush to the other side and back has tired you more than you will confess, Camp. You've actually grown a little gray, did you know, dear?"

She laid her lips upon the short locks on Graeham's brow, as he leaned toward her.

"Don't tempt my mendacity," he told her, with a smile; "I'd swear I was a cripple, halt and blind, to keep your lips there a moment longer! It was

not much of a trip, though. I changed from one boat to another, and came right back."

"And to think you need not have gone, if you'd only known."

"About old Jourdan's heir showing up, you mean? Odd, its being the little Delilah of the linen closet, after all, is n't it? And to think of her nerve! Right here in the midst of it all the time, and never turn a hair. And so she's chucked the money, 'all for love, and the world well lost,' eh? It 's like her not to count the cost."

"Ah," Miss Caruth sighed softly, "poor Callie! She gave it all for love, but it was not 'well lost'!"

"What, the fellow not worth the broken bits of her alabaster box?"

"It seems not; and yet — It has been a most cruel thing! She sacrificed her fortune for his sake, you know, and he has thrown her over."

"The cursed cad!"

Jane had been striking soft minor chords, that fell in with their voices as they talked and filled the pauses; and she kept her face turned from Graeham to the keyboard as she went on speaking.

"I told you a bit of her story once; do you remember?"

"No. Where was it?"

"In the hut by the river that day. I asked your advice for a friend, you remember? Callie was the friend."

Graeham's eyes, that had been blank with the effort to remember, flashed suddenly into startled life; a grayish shadow settled about his lips; he sat erect in his chair, with the slightly dazed expression that a man wears when he 's struck by a bullet before he has time to feel the pain.

"Friend?" he echoed blankly; "what friend?"

"Callie—Iola Jourdan now—was the friend. I gave you a slightly altered version of her story. I told you that she was engaged to one man and loved the other, and I asked you"—

Graeham's breath had stopped on his lips; his heavy, immobile face grew slowly into a masque cut from gray stone.

"You asked me?—I forget what it was," he said dully.

"There had been two men in her life, and I thought she loved the first man; but I was wrong, oh, so wrong. She had never loved any man but James Goodloe, the man to whom she was engaged. It was he for whom she sacrificed her fortune, and who has thrown her off because of—of the other man."

A slight sweat came upon Graeham's lip as he leaned forward to catch Jane's words, as she sat a little turned from him, stretching her hands along the keys.

"Where had she met James Goodloe?"

"Ah, that is the story I could not tell you that

day, you remember? But now — all my thoughts are yours, are they not?"

"Yes; all mine. Tell it me now."

"Poor Callie had been very unhappy, you know, dear; some one in her life — this other man had — had" —

"I understand. You tried to help her?"

"Not I so much as Mr. Carlysle. We were all interested in her, but Jim was very much touched by her desolation and her bravery — he called it that. But she was very hard to help; so impossible, you know! This man, James Goodloe, had advertised for a wife in some preposterous paper, and Jim took up the plan to marry Callie to him, — merely as an experiment; he was hardly serious at all at first. But Mr. Goodloe seemed such a fine fellow, so different from what one would expect from his doing such an unthinkable thing, and poor Callie was too *dead* to care, and so it went on. Jim did not dare to put her life back in her own hands, — anything seemed better than that, — and he hoped to see her safely married to this good fellow; I still think something will turn up some day to exonerate him! Yes, the story! I wrote the letters for Callie, as she cannot write, and it all went beautifully. Iola was so lonely and forsaken, poor girl, that she began to love him; at first I suppose to fill her empty life, and then, why she let herself go and loved him with all her heart. Then came this other thing about Chin-

quepin Falls; and almost the same day that Mr. Goodloe had written to her to meet him in New York, Jim found out that she was Iola Jourdan, and he wanted her to throw over Mr. Goodloe for the sake of the money — but you know how that turned out. But there was the story of her wretched past, that had to be told, for Jim would not let her marry him without telling him. There was a fearful struggle before she would give in, but at last she consented, and Jim wrote" —

"My God!" said Graeham slowly, the words seeming to be shaken from his lips upon a deep note of anger. He rose and walked forward blindly into the room, with his hands clinched at his sides. "My God, how I have been tricked, baited, by that madman!" He reached the mantel-shelf across the room, and, dropping his arms upon it, bowed his head upon them. All consciousness of Jane was swept from his mind by a passion of remorse and anger, that made him blind and deaf for the moment to all but the turmoil within his own soul, where he raged dumbly — as men raged in futile rebellion against their gods in olden times, when men thought the gods meddled and made in men's affairs — against himself, Carlysle, and the non-responsible, malignant circumstance that had strangled his reason in its toils.

Brute, fool, madman that he had been! As he lay there with buried eyes, his mind, like a hunted hare, fled backward through the labyrinth of events

that had ensnared him. The letter, the ring, the necklace, each fitted now with maddening smoothness into the chain of clear, uncompromising reason, — all but Carlysle's letter; that had yet to be reckoned with, — its clever casuistry clothed in damnable ambiguity. And on such evidence as that he had condemned her! — let Carlysle's supple meretriciousness weigh against his faith in her!

The sting of remorseful tenderness woke Graeham to consciousness of the present. He turned back to her, and she met him in silence, and in silence still locked her arms about him with tender strength. She did not question him — as well question a storm-cloud with a thunderbolt in it as a man with a face like Graeham's; but she clung to him, telling him by the close pressure of her arms that, whatever his fight might be, she was fighting it with him heart to heart.

Graeham dropped upon the floor at her feet, hiding his head against her, crumpling her gown in his hands, pressing remorseful kisses upon its folds, — with hoarse words of pleading, of passion, of rapture, mingled with curses that rang strangely in the girl's ears.

She left him so a moment, quivering herself under the stress of his emotion, still not speaking, — only bending over him, soothing him with mute caresses, pressing his head against her almost as a mother might have done.

"Don't, Jane, don't," he murmured brokenly, as she found his clinched hands, and opening them drew his arms about her.

"Don't what, dearest?"

"Be good to me, love me."

"Not love you! When you have told me what is troubling you, we will talk about my not loving you; but I cannot, cannot, stand this."

"I know; but 't is better borne than knowledge, Janet."

"Yet I must know. Oh, Camp, tell me, tell me!"

"Ay. Will you sit beside me while I tell you?"

"Why not?" in wonder.

"You will know why not in a minute. Oh, Jane, Jane, I have been in hell since I had Carlysle's letter!"

"Carlysle's letter?" she breathed wonderingly. "To you?"

Graeham drew the letter from his pocket and, leaning forward with his arms upon his knees, stared moodily at it, his brow black with anger.

"Let me think a bit first, Jane — think how to unwind this damnable snarl. But there 's no unwinding it; best cut it through at a stroke."

He took her hands, and drew her eyes firmly to meet his own.

"Jane, I am the man to whom you have been writ-

ing for months as Goodloe. It was I who courted Mary Meadows in those letters; offered her marriage; pursued her; urged her; and, cur that I am, flung her over at the last minute. Ah, don't take away your hands, Jane!"

"What can this mean?" The girl's voice died on her lips. "*You*, my — my" —

"Yes, your lover! It will be plain in a moment. But come back to me, Jane; come back, dear."

His open arms dropped to his sides, as he saw that she did not hear him; her eyes were fastened on him, with a tense question in them that cut to his consciousness like a shrill-edged cry in the night. A bunch of the primroses she had worn on her dress lay at Graeham's feet, crushed in his embrace. He picked them up, and with his eyes upon them began to speak in an even tone, almost without expression, only the veins that swelled upon his forehead and neck betraying that it was enforced.

"James Goodloe is my business manager at the mills in Redfalls, and the best friend I have on earth. He's the cleanest man I've ever known, and the truest and the sanest, and the most completely disillusioned. I was a lad when I met him first, way back in those days that I gave you a glimpse of that day by the river. I was a lump of raw nature in those early days,—I was about to say, no more: but the divine molecule must have been hidden somewhere in the mass; and as I grew to manhood, still

a crude, lumpish chap, I got to believing in that atom in myself; to find it more real than anything else. I knew that what it stood for was in the world somewhere, and that some day I'd meet it; and then" —

"The ideal?" Jane whispered, so softly that her lips only formed the words.

"Yes! And living women, the sort I met and knew in those days, palled beside its charm. Well, let me get through with this. By this time, you know, I was a man, and had found myself, and in the next dozen years my work filled my life from bank to bank; I needed nothing else. But I was growing like a young oak tree, that sucks in life at every pore, from its topmost leaflet to its last deep sucker under ground; and with my manhood came the deeper needs — the hunger for the things that manhood craves. I cut loose from my business, and went into the world." Graeham rose and walked about the room for a few minutes, deep in thought.

"I'll skip the record of those two years, Jane," he said at last quietly, as he took his seat again beside her, "and get on to how I got into this thing with this woman, Mary Meadows.

"It was after that time that I have passed over: I had gone back to work again; and as it had got to mean a great deal to me to have Goodloe near me, I put in a good bit of time at the mills at Redfalls.

I was sick of life, and hungry for it, too; savage with want, yet too bitter and nauseated with what I'd had to care to seek anything different; could n't believe there was anything different! Then Goodloe conceived this thing. And unless you knew the man, you could never fully understand the spirit in which he went into it. Goodloe has a soul like a clean, new deal board, plumbed by a spirit-level. He recognizes love as force, like any other; it 's a form of energy to him, like steam or electric current; and he handled my case that way. Let him? Oh, yes, I let him! I did not care. I did n't take much notice when he inserted the first letter, and not much more — oh, Janet, think of that! — not over much when the letter came in reply, though I answered it. But the next letter took hold of me. The essence that breathed from it was the thing I had been seeking all my life. I was beside myself with excitement, anticipation. The salt had found its savor again, with a vengeance. But Goodloe had a dozen theories, that I had to throttle one by one! His mind acts precisely like that atmosphere out there; things stand out clearly to him, with no 'effects' of sentiment or imagination. He saw, — we both saw, for the matter of that, — a man's hand in the thing; and he would have it that some writer or psychological crank was studying the thing from the woman's side, and that the very thing that had caught me was a clever ruse upon the fellow's part

to make it go. It ended in my coming to Alabama to sift matters and find the woman, — if it was a woman, — carrying on the correspondence through Goodloe meanwhile.

"You know the rest, Jane. I met you, and from the very first the same charm gripped me, but with a thousand times the potency. I recognized it, puzzled over it; but how connect the two? I met the other woman, also, you know; but again, how could I associate the delicate refinement that breathed from Mary Meadows's letters with "— Graeham laughed harshly —" with Delilah of the linen closet? It was the composite personality that puzzled me, had puzzled even Goodloe's shrewdness. What we neither could understand was, that a woman who could have written those letters should have done so. So plain now, as it is!

"Then I found I was getting to love you. I am thirty-seven years old, you know, dear, and that was first love! Think, if you can, what it meant to me? I fought an honest fight, though, to be true to the other woman, until I began to dream, to hope that you had got to care a bit, too, perhaps; then I went to pieces!

"'Why did n't I tell you'? A — h, why!" Graeham laughed again, a bitter note of mockery, as he passed his own motives in review. "Why did n't Ajax cast off that lariat the gods were throttling him with? Why did n't the poor devil with cotton

margins devouring him like a pack of wolves pull out in time?

"Jane, I saw the pearls I had bought, and addressed to Mary Meadows with my own hands, upon your throat, and I knew besides that Carlysle's secretary had receipted for them. The ring, the mate to this one," — he drew the other ring from his pocket, and displayed it upon his palm, — "upon your hand. I had seen you mail a letter to James Goodloe, and — confirmation sure as Holy Writ! — you opened the letter I had written Mary Meadows asking her to be my wife, before my eyes. I saw Carlysle hand it you, saw you take it as a matter of course — Dearest! your hand in mine again? What, both? How cold they are! You see, Jane, how I was the devil's own fool from that minute, roped and thrown! You see, dear?"

"I am beginning to see. Oh, my dear, my dear!"

She clung a moment longer to him and then took her hands away, to press them upon her eyes, as though to shut in something that she needs must face alone.

"Little things are coming back to me. I remember now you kissed the ring that day, poor Callie's ring," — a quiver passed over her, constricting her throat. "Why did you?" she whispered unsteadily. "Was it because you thought — fancied" —

"I thought you were Mary Meadows, — the

woman I loved, and the woman to whom I was engaged to be married," said he gravely.

Miss Caruth had always a clear pallor, that did not readily betray her by swift alternations; deep feeling stilled her, as intense motion takes on the form of rest; but as Graeham spoke, she grew slowly white and the lines of her face sharpened, until she seemed a head carved from some fine-grained stone. Her eyes were hard, as they turned shrinkingly to the letter in Graeham's hand; its contents seemed actually visible to her in some form of pollution.

"And you still thought I was that woman after — that?"

Graeham did not speak, but his eyes met Jane's firmly, in dumb, dogged remorse. He raised his hand to his collar as though he needed breath, and his face, set in lines of stern endurance, showed the veins in knotted cords upon his brow. He wore the look that men wear who are on trial for their lives, as they sit, deprived by the abstract power of the law of their human right to draw the fist back to the shoulder and strike, feeling the coil of damning evidence spun smoothly by lying lips close upon them.

He did not attempt to explain, to palliate; not yet. When souls meet in the trenches to fight it out, men do not talk. Nor did Graeham; he fought the next ten seconds of mortal strife in silence, with

Jane's hands in his, her soul face to face with his, across the barriers of his confession. The fight was Graeham's, in so far, at least, as to vanquish silence. Miss Caruth spoke gently, after a second longer of struggle.

"Let us go back together, dear, and see," — she paused to steady her voice, — "and see what can be done," she finished simply. "I must know, *know* before I — That last letter? After you thought you knew that I was Mary Meadows, why did you write it?"

"To give you an opening to retire from the affair with all dignity and grace. I knew — God, I thought I knew! — that you would graciously refuse Goodloe's proposal; I could have drafted the letter, I was so sure. I meant that that should end it. I never intended that you should know of my part in it, or that I knew of your own. Then came this thunderbolt from Carlysle! The most damnable lie a man ever penned! — 'a dearly loved young sister!' — 'a member of my own household!' He calls this woman that! I was in hell — tortured, when I read that. Those nights at sea — Ah, if you could know, Jane, what a thing my soul was in those first days, you would forgive me!"

He was upon his knees again at her feet, and she pressed her two hands upon his head, hiding his face from her, as she hung over him in an agony of renunciation too deep for words or tears.

"You went abroad to escape this marriage, that you fancied had been arranged for you."

Graeham lifted his head sharply, but she would not let him speak.

"No, Camp; listen, dear! I must *know!* You see that I must?"

"Then, yes!"

"And what brought you back?"

"Need you ask that, Jane?"

"I need to know all that was in your mind and heart."

"Do not ask me to turn over the rank turmoil of my mind before your eyes, Janet. Do not ask me! Ask me, if you will, to empty my heart; that at least is clean, for it has never left your keeping. I left it here," — he raised the palms of her hands and kissed them, — "and I found it here again. But my mind, poisoned by the filterings of — Do not ask it."

"Then answer me from your honor, Camp; that is clean, too."

"Ask me" —

"What brought you back to Morganton? Was it love for — for *me*, for Jane Caruth, or your pledge to Mary Meadows?"

"You forget that I thought you were the same?"

"Don't! Don't equivocate!"

For a moment Graeham wavered; then, "My pledge to Mary Meadows," he said hoarsely.

He took her clasped hands and softened their rigid hold in his own, and for a space they sat thus, without speaking. Graeham went on after a bit: —

"The shock of this thing loosened my grip on everything; but nothing short of death can beat the plain manhood out of a man, you know, dear. I loathed my life; but sheer, brute instinct made me reach for the only solid thing in sight, — that something in a man that makes him stand by his pledged word, through thick and thin. We were five days out when I got myself together, and knew what I had to do."

"Yes," said Miss Caruth steadily; "it is the only thing to do."

"What do you mean?" cried he quickly.

Miss Caruth met his eyes, hardened with premonitory anger, with gentle steadiness.

"Only what you have just said, that you knew you must redeem your pledge to this girl, — to Mary Meadows, or Iola Jourdan, as we know her now."

The vigorous browns and tans of Graeham's coloring were hard to displace ordinarily, but he showed a trace of pallor as he braced himself to meet the courage in Jane's eyes.

"I knew this was coming. I caught the trend of your thought some time ago, and I knew you 'd take this stand. Souls travel in orbits the same as planets, I suppose, and you must follow yours. There 's no need to thrash this out again. Logically, if you

like, I came back here to marry Iola Jourdan; and honorably I am bound to do so. But logic and honor — or life and death, heaven and hell, for the matter of that — weigh like a pinch of thistledown against your happiness, Jane."

"Yet honor had weight to bring you back across the world, to redeem your pledge to a woman you did not love."

"Jane, is this generous? Is it just?"

"Was it just to me to have married me with that — horror in your mind? No, no! You must hear me, Camp. Almost," — with sudden yearning she drew Graeham's hand to her breast, and held it there while she went on, — "almost it is worth this to *know* you love me. Those weeks when you were away, and — and even yesterday, to-day — ah! To have this hour of perfect love as a memory, in the empty years to come!"

"Curse memory! We will have each other! I will not give you up, Janet. Don't speak to me of honor! Honor is a conception of sane minds; this is hysteria. Be brave, and put these fancies from you. We are a man and woman living life; not a couple of puppets on the stage, hounded by a fate set on them by some playwright's imagination. This is a man's work; leave it to me, will you not? I will settle with this woman."

"I cannot take Iola Jourdan's lover — knowing what I know."

"I was never her lover for an instant in my life, nor any one's but yours, — body and soul, heart and conscience."

"No; your conscience is your own, as mine is my own, and it will not let me rob this girl of all that is left to her. She has given all for love, — fortune, name, all! And then shall I from my safe place calmly reach forth my hand, and snatch the fruits of her sacrifice from her? I could not, and you could not let me."

"Jane, darling, this is not stuff for your conscience to concern itself with. Don't erect the granite wall of an inner imperative between us! Try to see this from my point of view, — the point of view that the world would take. If you drew a hundred men from every position or profession, — let them be what they may, — and put this situation to them, I dare swear ninety-nine out of the hundred would do as I intend doing. This is a perfectly commonplace thing, except where it involves you. It is a bit of ugly, every-day life — rankly dramatic, I grant you, but having to do with a phase of life that cannot, shall not, enter your life. You cannot judge it so sanely as I; therefore let me settle it. I will make good Iola Jourdan's fortune to her, dollar for dollar."

"You do not know her in the least, if you think she is the sort of woman to be bought off, if you mean that. Sometimes I think none of us have ever

known her, or done her justice. We assumed that she lacked a soul, as we might have assumed that she lacked musical ability because she had not been taught to perform upon some instrument, and we arranged her future as lightly — callously, as we might have bought her a gown; we fitted it to her, influenced her to accept it, thrust it on her. I, *I* was the chief one in this; I made myself responsible for her future — and now to rob her of the future I gave her?"

Graeham stared at the floor, full of troubled thought.

"Jane," he said at last firmly, as one who speaks from knowledge deliberately withheld, "this is sentiment on your part. I do know this girl better than you do. Can you not trust me to do the right thing by her?"

"Trust you? Why should I not? You have already fought the fight that brought you back to her. All that is left is my part. I have only to leave you free to go the way your honor bade you go those nights at sea, and keep the oath that I gave her."

"What oath? Let me know all there is to know."

"You remember the night of the ball? James Goodloe's letter had come that day, and Jim was determined that he should not be deceived. He and Iola had a fearful hour together, but she finally con-

sented that he should write. Then she came on to my room, frantic with unhappiness, poor child, — poor wretched girl! She told me then, confessed, that she loved this man that we had 'arranged' for her to marry, that her only wish was to be his wife. And then she made me swear"— Miss Caruth broke off and mused a moment in deep thought. "How strange it seems now! but she made me swear never to come between James Goodloe and herself."

"Strange," muttered Graeham.

"Like a fate indeed, is n't it? And I — I told her never to let anything come between them; to hold to James Goodloe, as she would to a hand reached downward to her from the skies; and then I swore, *swore* never to come between them."

"The trap has closed upon us both!" said Graeham hoarsely. He took her in his arms and held her, without speaking, close to him for a space. "And for the rest of our lives, Jane?" he said at last fiercely. "Do you mean for me to try to live mine without you?"

"No," said she quietly, "no."

"What do you mean?" asked Graeham, in a deep inward voice.

"Did you not tell me that you had always loved me, in your soul?"

"Ah! But, Jane, Jane, I had not known the woman then; had not held you in my arms. Memory will be hell after this."

"No, no; for we shall belong to each other still. I shall never give up the part of you that is mine."

"I 'm a man, Jane; and love 's so different with men."

She clung closer to him in a momentary struggle, hidden from him, with her face pressed into his breast. Graeham went on presently, in a hard, unsteady voice: —

"You say you will never give me up: but as the years go on, — a beautiful woman like you, and of the world, — the world will claim you; others get in between, thrust me back — some other man, perhaps."

"No," said Jane simply; and for a moment added nothing to the word's quiet assurance. "Never let such thoughts come to you. Promise to keep the memory of me just as I am now, here upon your breast; never forget that I am yours, in all the years that will come to us, as I am at this moment. Never forget it, and never let yourself dream that a day will ever come when it could be otherwise."

"And you 'll see me sometimes?"

He spoke thickly, his cheek on hers wet with her tears.

"Why not? Not just yet, perhaps, but — after. We are not children. No one knows — not even Kate or Mr. Carlysle — what we are to each other. Let us keep it close in our two hearts, until — No-

thing can really part us, while we know that we belong to each other. This is but a little parting, dear. Tell me good-by, my own."

"It is the parting of soul and body, Jane. I cannot, cannot let you go!"

CHAPTER XV

"Come back with me to the first of all;
Let us lean and love it over again
And gather what we let fall."

SPRING — the exquisite, impetuous spring, that comes "before the swallow dares" to Alabama, had set the "jeweled prints of her feet" in acres of lush vegetation along the warm, fecund valley of the Tennessee. The warm wind was buoyant with moisture and pungent with sap, springing in endless acres of young corn and cotton, and pricked the nostrils sharply with the balsamic odor of dog-fennel, — that lovely hated pariah of the Southern fields, — that had laid a mantle of ermine and gold upon the denuded fields about Morganton, covering their gaping wounds and scars with a cloak of despised charity.

The river, full to its banks, ran whisperingly through a deep, green velvet sheath of new cane; and in the hot, still air of mid-noon, the muffled roar of Chinquepin, like a base organ note drawn out to infinity, was audible for miles. The planters along the river had been used to say that as long as you could hear Chinquepin, you were on Isom Jourdan's land; and on the overgrown lawns at McGuion House, its voice dominated the sunny stillness, ab-

sorbing the minor sounds of the summer day in a great soft blanket of sound.

Where the lawn overhung the river amid a jungle of blooming shrubs, a magnolia grew close to the water; and tied in its shade, a clumsy punt rocked upon the lazy current, like a great unwieldy cradle. It had rocked one of its passengers to sleep as it happened, and the other sat as still as though she too slept, with hands clasped about her knees, and dreaming eyes upon the shining stretches of the river. Iola was clad in the old blue cotton-checks, turned in at the throat; and her hair, parted on her brow, fell in long rippling braids, as red as ruddy sunshine, across her shoulders. She held a piece of sewing in her idle hands; and upon a man's rough brown jeans coat in the bottom of the boat a tiny tot, with a mop of gold hair, lay fast asleep, its sturdy, rosy limbs bare to the wind, that was tanning the little cheeks a deeper rose. The girl's eyes turned to him from time to time in brooding glances, and once she stooped and kissed one dimpled foot kicked out toward her, with a long kiss, yearning and possessive, as only a mother's kiss can be.

From where she sat she had a long view of the river toward Morganton, across a point of the lawn where the ruins of an old summer-house stood; and as she raised her eyes from her sewing, a speck upon the full, shining tide of the river riveted her gaze. That sharp black dot was a boat; and the

two thin dashes of black, oars; and the speck of dazzling white must be the rower, she knew. She watched it idly as it drew nearer, cutting a broad furrow like a silver spearhead in the water, and something in the way the man handled the oars fastened her mind upon it: the planters and the river-men about the cotton landings had not that long reach forward, that easy swing to the oars; and as the boat stood out clearly in the light, she saw that the man at the oars wore flannels. She had a quick thought of Clark. But no; Clark was slenderer than this man, and swayed to his stroke: this man sat like a rock; and something in the bend of his broad back, as he leaned against the current, held her eyes in a fascinated gaze.

The color had fled from her cheeks and her deli cate nostrils expanded, straining for breath as she leaned forward, intent upon the man in the boat. Only for a moment longer she hung in doubt; and as the rower raised his face, with a low cry of unbelieving joy she sank upon her knees in the bottom of the punt, holding the shrubberies aside to watch him, herself unseen, hanging upon his unconscious face in an agony of doubt and hope. Where could he be going? The landing at McGuion House lay past her up the river, and Graeham's glance ahead suggested that as his destination. The thought of Chinquepin sprang to her mind. Could it be business with her uncle, Carter Cartright, that had brought

him? But twin with the thought was born the certainty that it was not business that had brought him — not with Carter Cartright, at any rate. She knelt motionless in the boat, her eyes upon the skiff that was drawing nearer with each powerful swing of the oars, struggling with an impulse of flight, of concealment, of escape, that fought with an unreasoning hope, and kept her quivering in the balance, without power to move or even think coherently.

The point of the lawn was yet between the two boats, when a movement of the child at her feet drew her eyes downward to it in a sudden panic. The child! She had forgotten it! Unreasoning hope — the mad pilot that has wrecked so many women's hearts — urged her to action. She snatched the child in her arms, and made one long light step from the boat to the shore. It was but a step to the ruined summer-house, where she could hide him until — Panting under the weight of the boy, she hurried forward, bending low in the shrubberies. The baby still slept, but in his sleep, feeling her arms about him, he nestled closer; a smile parted his lips, a sleepy murmur came from them, his chubby arms tightened about Iola's neck, and he pressed his tousled head into her bosom with helpless, nuzzling motions. A tremor ran through her limbs; all at once she was too weak to run, and stood straining the baby's form to her breast, raining kisses upon the little upturned face, even as her frightened eyes peered

through the branches to watch the progress of Graeham's boat upon the stream without. Only the shrubberies were between them now, and she saw Graeham's face plainly. He was darker, sterner, older than when she had seen him last; and there was something in the controlled quiet of his face that steadied her, as though a strong cold hand had been laid upon her shoulder. She stood where she had paused, thinking more clearly; her eyes on Graeham, her trembling arms gathering the child closer and closer yet to her bosom.

She had remained at the hotel a couple of miserable, restless weeks after Graeham's unexplained departure, to which she alone of all who conjectured as to his mysterious business abroad, held the key; and had then returned quietly in the night to her old home, where old Carter Cartright and his son, who was heir to the land, had taken up a temporary abode, bringing the child with her. Carter Cartright had asked her no questions; he had made her welcome; and beyond the bare fact quietly made known to the few it concerned, that his niece had returned and refused to accept the conditions of her father's will, offered no explanation, and none had dared ask it at his hands. Iola had, seemingly, pieced the broken thread of her old life to the new, keeping her uncle's house as she had kept her father's, except that it was infinitely more a home than it had been in those days. She had spent her time, for the

most part, in the old garden with her boy, whom the two men had taken at once into the very cores of their rather sunless hearts. So the weeks had slipped past, bringing her in all but one scrap of news from the town and the people among whom she had so lately made her home, — that the Carlysles with Miss Caruth had gone abroad for the summer, thus snapping the last thread that had connected her with Callie Larkin or the past. Whether the identity of Iola Jourdan with Callie Larkin was known to others, or whether Carlysle had kept faith with her, she had no means of knowing: if her uncle knew he made no sign, and equally she was in ignorance of how much or how little Graeham might know; though with instant intuition she had divined the success of her reckless plan to separate him and Miss Caruth, first by Miss Caruth's trip abroad, and now by Graeham's presence.

A wave of triumphant joy surged through her; all the eager desires and longings, that the weeks of dull monotony on the farm had lethargized, waked in a pang of ecstasy, as the flashlight of hope flared across her mind. Life at Graeham's side — ah, what did it not promise of rapture! Her heart swelled to bursting, with the joy of the unattainable attained; hope deferred — sickened with longing, wasting with despair — sprang to new life, resurrected by the miracle of his presence.

She measured with a lightning glance the distance

to the summer-house and back. There was time, just time and no more, before he would round the point and her boat be in view; she took one step in the direction of the ruined arbor, where she meant to hide the boy and return to intercept Graeham, with every furtive instinct in her nature urging her on. But the sturdy, two-year-old boy was heavy: she paused to shift his weight, and as she did so he waked, wearing the grieved lip he always wore at waking; but his eyes, still dim and clouded with sleep, fell on his mother's face; they cleared, smiled; he dug his hands into her neck in a throttling hug, as he clung to her with cooing almost articulate words of baby-love. The girl wavered; she cast a hurried glance to the river. Graeham had thrust his hat back as he rested a moment on his oars, and his face was in full view. The manliness that had so charmed her, in his level glance, his frowning brow, the candid sweetness of his mouth, were there the same; she admired him, coveted his strength, his warmth of kindliness, with the same eager longing; the charm that had fixed her held her still. But the face upon her bosom bound her with a spell that Graeham's could not break! Life beckoned from the river; but life was here, in its fulfillment, upon her breast.

She turned deliberately and walked back to the boat, laid the child down upon its bed, and had seated herself quietly at her sewing as Graeham's boat

rounded the point. He saw her instantly, and in a couple of strokes brought his boat alongside, and secured it to an overhanging bough.

"Well," he said calmly, busied with the rope, "I 'm here at last, Mary. Have you nothing to say to me, after I 've come across half the continent to fetch you?"

There was a hard composure in his manner not good to hear, and the girl had an instant sensation of having been roughly thrust off. She was trembling so that she could scarcely achieve the sentence as she replied, and her face was as white as the alder blooms above her head.

"'F you'll tell me what to say," she faltered, with radiant eyes of troubled joy.

"Ah, I cannot quite do that, my dear," said he, in a tone kindly over an undertone of coldness. "But I have come two thousand miles to hear what you have to say to me, and I have much to say to you, much on my own account and much on yours; and it may be that when I have done, you will know what to say to me. I hope so."

An indescribable change had come to Graeham. He had always a peculiarly deep, persistent vitality, that had pervaded his personality with the glow of a mellow kindliness. The force within him did not show itself in vivacity of glance or radiance of smile; it radiated from him in obscure waves of impersonal kindliness, that warmed the hearts of those with

whom he came in contact; and though Iola could not have defined the lack in him, she felt it. Graeham had withdrawn into himself, carrying the cordial that had been wont to vivify life for those about him with him, leaving the exterior chill. He sat looking down the river for a minute, with his eyes blank with thought.

"I don't know," he resumed, with a touch of his old-time bluntness, "that so much needs to be said between us, after all. I have the idea that a good deal of it is plain already, eh? No need to go back of Carlysle's letter, is there? I got it, as you know; and, as you also know, I acted like a cur. I 'm here, Mary, to ask if you can forgive me, and to say I 'm ready to carry out my contract that I funked then, as nearly as we can on the original basis. When we began this thing, you needed a husband to stand between you and the world that had used you ill, and threatened to use you worse, and I wanted — no matter what. I 'm here," he went on, after a second of struggle that had hardened his eyes and the lines about his mouth, "to say I 'll be that husband, — put my shoulder between the world and you; and I 'll take this mite here" — he reached a long arm for the child, who was kneeling in the punt, making little elastic, enticing motions toward Graeham, with radiant, friendly eyes. Graeham set him on his knee, looking with grave gentleness into his friendly little face, that smiled back at him with

a brave gleam of milk teeth as he took his dimpled fist into his palm.

"Friends from this hour, eh? So that's settled." Still holding the child's hand, he went on speaking to Iola: —

"I'll make this little lad my own, if you are willing, and he shall never know the difference. I will settle upon him the money for the falls, that you sacrificed to keep this contract with me."

Iola did not speak; it is doubtful if she heard Graeham's words, or gathered from them any but a blurred impression of their sense; her mind was filled with a passion of regret and longing. She had a sense upon her of desperate mistake, confusion, unreality. Had they all been wrong, then? He had not cared! He had forgiven her sin; taken the child to his heart, proposed to give him his name, to raise him as his own. If she had but trusted him! Sitting silent in her place, watching Graeham with the child upon his knee, she went back over her course step by step, — to the torn envelope upon his floor, that had given her opportunity into her hands. Ah, if she had but told him then! Nothing back of Carlysle's letter, he had said; and nothing since it either, it seemed; for his manner afforded her no faintest clue to what had passed in the interval since its receipt.

He had deliberately wiped out the months of their joint residence at the Midland, leaving the slate

blank, save for the terse conditions of their contract; and his controlled quiet when he had called her Mary had warned her not to revert to it, but to accept the cue of his silent refusal to recognize her as Callie Larkin or Iola Jourdan, although his allusion to the falls told her he knew. It was like Graeham to cut straight through the tangled situation with a stroke; accepting what was tenable, rejecting and ignoring all that could not be adjusted upon a basis of solid good sense.

Something in the restrained coldness of his glance had pierced her with a consciousness of her treachery to Miss Caruth. But how could it be possible that he knew? Yet the thought gave her pause. Dared she hold him to his word, knowing? accept his sacrifice, he knowing that she knew it to be such? But why should she call it sacrifice? He had come to her freely, — had sought her, by his own account, half across the earth to make her his wife. The future smiled; a memory of her triumph at the ball touched her mind; who could tell but, after all, he might learn to love her?

Under the impetus of swift revulsion from despair to hope, her heart leaped toward Graeham with an impulse of passionate love; the radiant energy of youth and spring and love was in the flushed, trembling smile she turned upon him, and in the naïve confession of her glance.

"It was n't no sacrifice," she murmured, harking

back to his allusion to the money; "I'd give it er million times 'n' welcome fur — fur you!"

A line showed quickly in Graeham's brow; he did not glance at her as he began to speak, with a visible effort and hard determination.

"There is something else" — But he did not add it; he paused as though seeking, and not finding, words to soften his meaning. "I'm a blunt man," he broke in at last, "and what I'm going to say may seem a bit rough — I'd be gentle if I could; but it's got to be said. Don't make any mistake, my girl, as to what this is I'm offering you, or what I have to offer.

"I do not forget that I led you into this, or that I voluntarily assumed responsibility for all the consequences. Well, I'm willing to shoulder them. I lost you your fortune, and this child," — he laid his open palm upon the child's tumbled curls, with a gesture full of grave responsibility, — "his father; and the child's mother the protection of a husband's name. I will make all that good, for I can. I will give you my name, make you mistress of my house, shield you with a husband's care, protect you, cherish you, raise this little lad as my own son — but that is all, Mary. Anything more is not mine to give. Do not think me any more brutal than I have to be; 't is better to thrash this out to-day, and let it rest afterward. You are a beautiful woman, more beautiful even than I had thought; and women

count on that sort of thing to get them what they want. I would have to be duller than I feel I am, not to know — suspect" — a deep flush rose to Graeham's brow, he stammered diffidently, but he got himself in hand and went firmly on, with a frown of repugnance but unfaltering determination — "that something beside your promised word to me has held you to your contract to marry me; and it may be that you count upon your beauty, what many men would call your fascination, in the daily contact of a life spent under the same roof, to turn me — change me, wipe out" — A hard tremor shook his voice to silence, and under his heavy tan his pallor was evident. After a minute he resumed: "It seems to me that in fairness to you, to us both, it is best to tell you that that cannot be. I could not love you, child, if I would. Love has gone from me. My heart, my soul, every impulse in me that would turn me to the love of a woman, belong to — another woman. Every atom in me that is not grossest clay is hers; and the clay would wake to life and fight to reach her, if it were buried under ten tons of earth as dull as it! I will always be hers; she" — Graeham lifted his face, forgetful of the woman who sat before him in stony quiet, touched with rapture, his eyes veiled and dull with the vision that he saw within him — "will always be mine! The rest is yours, cleanly and honestly, if you care to take it up."

The boom of Chinquepin filled the silence that fell heavily at the end of Graeham's speech. The girl toyed with the sewing upon her lap, with shaking fingers; her brows over her downcast eyes were gathered in the frown of tragic pain that Graeham had seen before, the night when he had called her a red rose. He saw it with the same throb of pity now, and bent quickly toward her; but she raised her hand with an outward gesture of repellent scorn.

"Forgive me, child," he said huskily. "We may have forty years of life together. I could not live a lie for forty years!"

"You will not need to," she said quietly. "Do you remember that night of the ball, the night you called me er red rose? You told me then that the thing I lacked, was the on'y thing that counted with you. Well, I say that back to you, Mr. Graeham. Th' on'y thing I'd take from you is the thing you 've given — her." Her voice had gathered firmness as she went on, and a smile steadied the tremulous corners of her mouth, that had lost their Puck-like curve and were straight with earnestness. "What do I want with th' husks uv love you offer me, when I have th' sweet kernel uv th' corn!" She held her open arms to Graeham, and he placed the child silently within them; and they remained looking at each other across his bright head, in silence.

"Th' sacrifice — 'f you call it that — was fur love, Mr. Graeham. I wanted to be your wife," — she looked him cleanly in the eyes as she spoke, with upraised head, — "because I wanted th' love I thought you 'd give your wife. I was starving fur a taste uv love, that sort uv love. What is th' difference," — a deep flush rose in her cheeks, and her eyes steadied to the cold fire of steel as she went on, — "between this that you offer me 'n' — 'n' "— She buried her head with a shudder of repugnance upon the child's shoulder.

"I have nothing else to offer," said Graeham dully.

"Then go," said she, in a smothered voice.

"Leave you now, you mean, and give you a bit longer to think this over?"

"No; no! Go."

"This must end it all, Mary. Is all said that you would have said between us?"

"No; there is one thing more. That night — that same night uv th' ball, when I — I"— Shame weighed her eyelids down, but she went on determinedly, — "When I put my arms around your neck, I — I *knew*, 'n' I thought I had er right to."

"That was my fault," put in Graeham hastily. "Do not let it distress you. What did you know?"

"I knew that you were James Goodloe."

"You did! How could you have known, possibly?"

"I read the letter that you wrote him; it was on th' table open."

"You read that letter? Then you knew that I thought" —

"Yes."

"And you let Carlysle write that letter, knowing?"

"You had called me er red rose 'n' her er star!" she said simply.

Graeham sat leaning upon his oars, studying her curiously.

"Why does God make such women as you? So good, so wholesome to look at, and so rotten within! He may know why He made you, and may forgive you, because you round out some purpose known only to Him — but I shall not."

. . . . . .

Another June since Graeham had made his trip down the river had plumed the lilacs in the old McGuion garden with heart-shaped clusters of bloom, and set the oleander thickets blazing with rosy fire, that rivaled the fringed edge of day slipping away behind the western sky. The calm of the coming night soothed the desolation of the forsaken place, and Chinquepin's voice had begun to take on the hush of the summer nights, when it seemed to sing under breath, and a thrush in the alder by the river sang a brief clear song, and sang it over again.

There were signs of life about the old place, and even signs of care. The great lawns had been partly cleared; and though the pile of débris still desolately held its own, the grim incubus of hate that once had brooded there was gone; driven hence, it may be, by the ceaseless babble of Claude's little tongue, and the scamper of his feet like a nimble rabbit's among the ruins of his ancestral rooftree.

A little party was gathered on the lawn in the shadow of the lilac hedge, where a slab of marble, laid across the pedestal of a fallen statue, made a capital table. The guests were gathered about a festal board, where a banquet seemed to be in progress. A man's handkerchief spread upon the stone served as tablecloth, and was graced at decorous intervals by acorn-cups. A cigar-case heaped with rose leaves made a noble trencher at one end, and at the other a matchbox supported a bit of sticky bread and jam, with the prints of nibbling teeth very discernible upon it.

A rag doll, somewhat indiscreetly candid in the matter of cotton stuffing, occupied the seat of honor opposite the host, who hugged a dead mole, with a string tied to one disconsolate flipper, to his breast with determined fondness; Peter Clark, at the host's right hand, faced a yellow kitten, bored of aspect and with the saturnine expression of a cat who recognizes that conditions and not theories confront him. A discussion touching the propriety of the mole's pre-

sence — he being dead — had just been concluded, and relations were, for the moment, a trifle strained between Clark and his host.

"I can't think," said Clark to Iola, who sat at the other end of the bench with her sewing, "I can't think how he keeps the confounded thing so fresh! Every time I 've been here for a month, he 's had that dead beast hugged up in his arms."

"Uncle Cart gets him a new one every morning, before he is awake. Don't tell him it's not the same one, please. It would break his heart."

"Catch me robbing anybody of an illusion! Mr. Cartright is very fond of him, is n't he? I don't know how he'll stand being parted from him," concluded Clark, with a covert glance at Iola's face. She had dropped her sewing, and, with startled eyes of premonitory dread fixed on his face, leaned forward with clasped hands.

"'Parted from him'?" she echoed, with a catch in her voice, that strove to be unconcerned; "what air you talking erbout? Nothin' could n't part Uncle Cart 'n' Claude."

"I 'm going to take him East with me, when I go next week. My sister wants him."

"*My* child! Wants *my* child! Air — air you crazy, Peter?"

"The law of Alabama says he 's mine, Iola."

"Th' law!" she flung it from her with a face of tremulous white scorn; but Clark, watching her

closely, saw, as he had expected to see, the shadow of a fear that was more than half awe fall across her face. To the rural Southerner "th' law" is a weird, resistless force, abstract and terrible, capable, like God, of giving and taking away, and a thing against which it is madness and desecration to struggle.

"What has the law to do with *my* child?" she demanded tensely. "He's not er law child, 'n' so how ken th' law take him erway!" with quivering reason, that only half believed its argument.

"The law assumes that a woman who will not give her son a legal father, who cares nothing for his good name or her own, is not a fit person to have charge of him. That is the plea my lawyer will put in, and the courts here will make no trouble about it, I suppose."

Iola was gazing wildly at him, her brows locked in the tragic frown of despair, that made a straight line of them.

"Plea?" she murmured distractedly; "er — er plea to take my baby, 'n' — 'n' giv' him to er woman in New York! Oh, *God!*"

Clark was as white as the girl herself as he rose and came to her side, his face set with desperate purpose.

"Listen, Iola; this thing has been going on between us for a year. I have offered over and over to make you my wife — begged and prayed you to come back to me!"

"I 've axed you er million times not to come, 'n' tol' you it was no use."

"The year mentioned in your father's will expired three months ago. Of course, as long as there was a question of that infernal water I would not ask you, but you knew why I came. But you cannot think that now! I have a home for you in Morganton, standing empty, — and I 'm sick of this cursed loneliness! I want my home, my boy, my wife! But this is my last appeal. Come to me now, or I take the boy East with me and never set foot again in Alabama."

"I cannot, Peter, cannot! I — I do not love you."

"Come without love! I 'll make you love me. It will be different now, with the child," he whispered brokenly.

"'F you take him, Peter, I will kill myself," she returned, with stony quiet; "he is th' on'y thing on earth that loves me."

Clark took her hands, making her meet his eyes, that forgot for once to be impassive and were full of plain, manly pain and purpose.

"What about me, and the last four years of my life?"

"'F — 'f you had ever loved me, you would n't take my baby 'n' give it to er woman in New York. Oh, Peter," with a burst of anguish, "say you won't — oh, say it, say it!"

"I must unless you come with him. I must have my boy."

"You ken have him here. I'll let you come. I'll never say again you must n't come."

"I would not leave him with you as things are. I do not think you are fit to raise him, if you will persist in depriving him of his name. I will put him where he will not know of his disgrace, at any rate."

"Not fit? Oh, God! not fit to raise my own child. *I* not fit! 'N'—'n' you?" she tremulously demanded; "air *you* fit?"

"My sister will bring him up."

With a cry she sprang toward the child, and before Clark could divine her purpose was running staggeringly across the lawn in the direction of the river, with him in her arms. He reached her side as she was leaping from timber to timber, among the rotting logs of the landing.

"Are you mad, Iola! Give me the boy—quick! Not on that broken timber, for God's sake!"

She stood upon the extreme end of a jutting timber, that sagged with her weight, her hand grasping a broken beam above her; and below the strong, inshore current. Clark dared not trust his weight upon the log, though her slight form swayed beneath the child's weight.

"Come back, Iola! Blossom, come back!"

"No, no! I'll put him where your sister can't get him, and he won't know of his disgrace."

Clark ventured down the log, until he could grasp the child's hanging hand.

"Iola, listen to me. I was only trying you, dear. I would not take the boy from you. I only wanted to make you know what it is to suffer, as you have made me suffer with wanting you and my child."

The girl paused, came back a step toward him, still holding to the beam as she gazed with wonder at the young man's face, haggard with anxiety. The wild turmoil of her fear gave way to something softer as she gazed.

"Suffer like this, Peter?" She pressed the child to her bosom, with anguished tenderness as she spoke.

"Ay; as much as that."

She swayed toward him, and Clark caught the child quickly from her; and after a moment of hesitation included her in his embrace, and stood holding them both firmly in his arms.

"Down there nobody could n't part us," she murmured restlessly. "I 'd ruther be down there with him then to let that woman in New York" —

"No one can take him from you now, Blossom. This is the only place where you will be able to keep him. Stay here with him, won't you?"

"You won't never, never set th' law on me?"

"Only to bind you to me, and him to you, so that nothing can ever part us three again."

Her arms were closing jealously around the child as his drew her closer, and they stood thus together, locked in a silent embrace, with Chinquepin's sleepy night-voice singing a lullaby over the darkening land.

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